On the Disasters of the Indochina War

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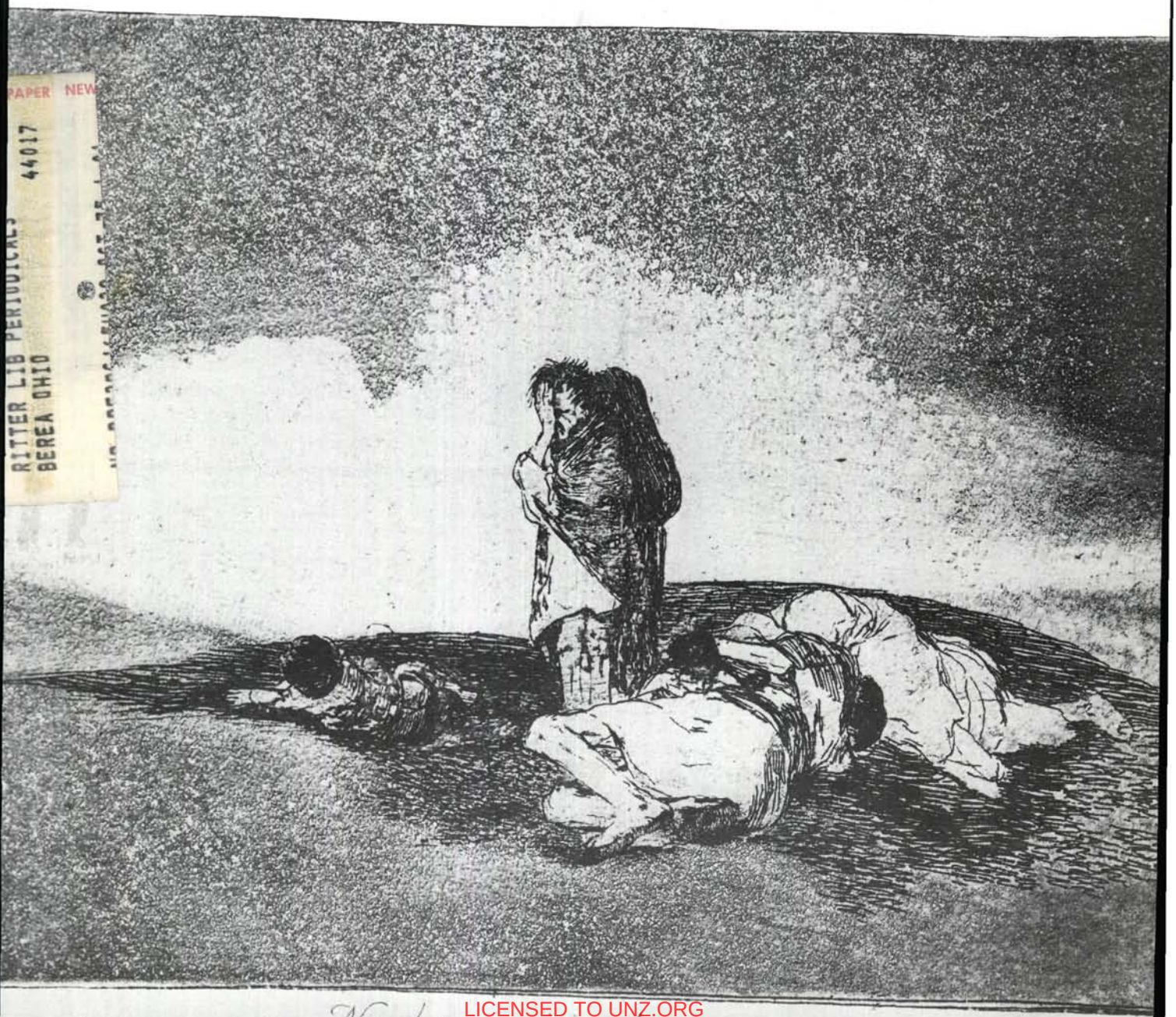

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TRB

from Washington
May 3, 1975

Thieu and Nixon

Nguyen Van Thieu's resignation recalls Richard Nixon's. Both were forced out, both overstayed their time, both gave relief by going. Neither man had much magnetism or strong personal following. Both departures were tragic.

I have just reread the Nixon farewell address and it is couched in affecting, not to say lofty, terms. There is no use sneering at it: "I would say only that if some of my judgments were wrong—and some were wrong—they were made in what I believed at the time to be the best interests of the nation." This is the right note for a concluding episode; he leaves his despair to history and God.

Thieu's hour-and-a-half harangue blamed Americans who gave so many lives to keep him in power. At least in translation it is paltry. It is to be hoped that this mortifying episode will not be forgotten in America soon. Vietnam is the classic example of the master becoming captive of the servant, the superpower controlled by its puppet state. If America and Russia ever make nuclear war it will not be over frontal disputes; it will be over some rival pygmy client states, probably about a petty issue that could have been avoided.

We became so tied to Thieu that we had to flatter him, coddle him, obey him; it reversed the laws of nature as though the sun had to obey the moon. When the normal law of gravity finally reasserted itself, the moon felt abused, betrayed.

Betrayal, I suspect, occurred. It is hard to read the story without that feeling. Note that if Thieu was using Nixon, Nixon was using Thieu. Let us start when that proud man, Lyndon Johnson, finally decided that his military advisers and his inherited staff from Kennedy's regime, the "best and the brightest," had led him into a blind alley and that the United States could not win the war by sending in more troops. He faced the tragedy of his false assumptions and, on March 31, 1968, halted bombing above the 20th parallel, called for peace negotiations, and said he would not run. He did not attend the Democratic Chicago convention in 1968, and in 1972 they did not even hang his picture in the main hall of the Miami convention.

But why should Thieu in 1968 have gone along with the Democrats in seeking peace? American power kept him in office and he saw no reason for helping out candidate Hubert Humphrey; he probably sensed that Nixon would bid up his terms and, in an unseemly dilatory maneuver, he balked at the shape of the negotiating table. It is odd to reflect now how a helpful nudge from an Asian 8000 miles away might have benefited Humphrey and changed one of the closest presidential races in US history. Nixon beat Humphrey only by seven-tenths of one percent while the Democrats won Congress. If Humphrey had been elected in 1968 he would probably be completing his second term now!

Richard Nixon won, restored cozy relations with Thieu, and gave him veto power over slow peace negotiations. Americans were disillusioned, and even the window-dressing of Thieu's "re-election" in a one-candidate contest did not restore faith. They wanted to save face and get out. Gradually American troops were withdrawn but then, in 1972, came a new sticking point. Secretary Kissinger announced that "peace is at hand" just before the election. But still the cease-fire didn't come.

President Thieu wanted a sign. He wanted to be sure that the Americans didn't go away and forget him. So President Nixon gave him a terrible sign. He ordered the Christmas-time "carpet-bombing" of Hanoi, Haiphong and the industrial heartland of North Vietnam. Peasants below—men, women and children—were killed as the great B-52s swept over. Theoretically this was the Nixon maneuver designed to bring the Communists to the peace table—a decision made without consulting Congress or advisers, by the recluse in the White House.

But Thieu's speech last week gives more weight to the theory that Messrs. Nixon and Kissinger were trying to convince him that there was no limit to which the United States wouldn't go, if only he would sign the revised agreement. Thieu did not want to sign until the Communist troops who had infiltrated South Vietnam were cleaned out. A reasonable request, on the whole, from his viewpoint. But Hanoi wouldn't agree, and Messrs. Nixon-Kissinger were getting impatient. Thieu signed at last, and now feels betrayed.

"I won a solid pledge," he said last week. He told his defeated nation with considerable verisimilitude in his emotional televised address that President Nixon had given him assurances of continuing help.

It is hard not to believe, in retrospect, that this isn't so, that Nixon-Kissinger did not make extralegal, extra-Constitutional representations of future military assistance. President Ford declines to make public the Nixon-Thieu correspondence. He says that it does not go further than the published material we already have. I am inclined to think this is correct. The so-called understanding, or "pledge," was more a matter of how words were pronounced than the words themselves. Messrs. Nixon-Kissinger had no legal right to commit the United States to a future course of action, and there was little reason for believing that Congress or the nation would resume energetic intervention. But Nixon had just won an election landslide that would keep him in office 'til January 1977, and he was ready to turn over mountains of military supplies to Vietnam. So Thieu signed.

What does America do now? It is chastened and subdued, and Europeans ask if it has lost its nerve. I see no sign of it, if only we can persuade Messrs. Ford-Kissinger-Rockefeller not to keep implying that Congress is to blame. After another war, far greater than this, the United States produced the Marshall Plan in 1947. When Republican Vandenberg heard of the Truman $17 billion plan he upbraided James Reston of *The New York Times* for printing such drivel: "No administration would dare to come to the Senate with a proposal like that," he declared. Truman did, and Vandenberg ultimately led the successful fight for it—one of the most glorious moments in American history.

Now the small nations of Southeast Asia lie crushed and bloody with an evil the US helped produce. There is some sort of moral obligation for America there, though we may not be able to define it. Perhaps when wounds have healed a little we can do something.

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:r: "No hay quien los socorra."—"There is no one to save them." From Goya's *Disasters of War*. Courtesy Wildenstein & Co.

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On the Disaster

The collapse of the American adventure in Indochina came just as we were embarking on the Bicentennial observances. A pall would in any case have been cast over the festivities: how could it have been otherwise as long as the United States continued to fuel a fratricidal war and impede a negotiated peace? But the events unfolding so quickly in Vietnam and Cambodia seemed almost to turn our days of national celebration into judgment days. Two hundred years have passed since the farmers of Lexington and Concord fired the first shots of the revolution; and for 25 of those years our might has been deployed to frustrate an indigenous political and social revolution in Vietnam. Finally it was clear that American power had failed in its squalid mission.

No just cause is served by idealizing the Vietnamese revolution or minimizing its proclivity to cruelty. The late Paul Mus, perhaps the wisest student of Vietnamese culture, saw "great violence and extreme coercion" as inevitable features of change in Vietnam—even if the French and the Americans had not intruded into its history. The victory of Hanoi is not, then, an intrinsically joyful event. But the excruciating agony suffered by Vietnam and Cambodia is largely of our making. No reparations we could pay will balance the evil we did there.

The Vietnam debacle should occasion a reassessment of both the purposes and limits of our power; if the Bicentennial helps us focus on the contrast between our idealism and our crimes so much the better. Those who have moved among the mighty will urge that the reassessment be general, almost abstract. They will call this restraint "avoiding recriminations," an unexceptionable aim. But we should not be excessively generous. A genuine reappraisal, moreover, should not fix only on the present incumbents and their policies, for the enormity before us was crafted as well by some of the most eminent latter-day doves. Nor would it be wholly out of place for the peace movement to review its role in allowing the government to sustain the war. For an end to the killing always entailed—as it does now—a coalition in Saigon willing to negotiate a political settlement with the NLF. Rather than discuss the complexities of a coalition, most popular antiwar politicians opted for facile sloganeering over withdrawal deadlines which, while hastening the return of the American troops, did little to stop the war.

Much of this may seem like ungrateful quibbling; but, as the following essays demonstrate, our stakes in self-scrutiny are great.

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Our SOBs

by Harold R. Isaacs

Indochina was the scene but China was the backdrop of the drama now coming to its end, the stage strewn with corpses and filled with dazed and uncomprehending survivors. Vietnam and Cambodia is where the action took place, but for reasons why it all happened one has to look beyond to China. These reasons do not make "sense" out of what Americans did in Indochina but they do come closer to "explaining" what the Americans thought they were doing there.

The China background is there from beginning to end of the whole long bloody story. The ultimate irony is that all the protagonists in the Vietnam tragedy shared feelings and perceptions relating to China that were at bottom more alike than different, enough to have produced quite different outcomes. It is at least possible to imagine such outcomes well within the political realities as they existed after the middle of 1945. But the actors in this drama saw their differences as greater than their alikenesses and therefore slew each other in great numbers for year after year until now. And the slaying is not yet done.

Vietnamese nationalism, Communist or non-Communist, was directed against France. But France ruled Indochina for less than a century. Long before France, China was the prime foe of Vietnamese independence, in imperial times a demanding suzerain, in more recent times a claimant to controlling influence. When Ho Chi Minh and his Communist nationalists proclaimed independence in Hanoi in 1945, they had a Kuomintang Chinese occupation force to deal with and they saw China as the power with which they would have to deal, beyond France, if they were to stay free of foreign rule or control. This became more, not less, of a fact after Communist China replaced Kuomintang China on their northern frontier. In those years Ho Chi Minh showed a readiness to be flexible in any direction that would move him toward his nationalist goals. Ho was a Communist, but as he plainly indicated himself in 1945, and as his whole career and indeed the course followed by his successors showed, Vietnamese communism was as nation-centered as Stalin's, Tito's and Mao's, perhaps even more so. It is impossible to say what might have happened had the United States in 1945 had the capacity and the wit to play the game into which Ho invited it. The results could hardly have been more disastrous than those that came out of the course the United States followed instead.

It began in 1945 by acquiescing in and then actively aiding the return of the French to their former colony at the end of the war with Japan. The reasons for this were many: ignorance and indifference, Europe-centered myopia, a view of the world that assigned greater weight to recovery of French power than to the unwillingness of Vietnamese to remain under French rule, an inability to see that the renovation of all politics and all power systems in Asia after the defeat of Japan would not wait on American conceptions of timetables and priorities, or conform on naive demand to American images of the world and its peoples.

When power in China passed to the Communists all these elements and more fused into an American policy that desperately and more and more blindly tried to throw up bulwarks against what was seen as an onrushing Communist tide. The reality of the new Chinese reality was somber enough; in American minds it was feverishly enlarged by all the swiftly reappearing images of threatening vastness and numbers, swarming hordes, inscrutability, devilish cleverness, the yellow and red perils rolled into one great fearful lurid menace to American power and security, indeed to human well-being and survival. Thus began the era of building world security by making any and every deal we could with any son-of-a-bitch anywhere who was ready to be "our" son-of-a-bitch regardless of state of grace, social creed or continuing condition of servitude in which he held his own people.

Despite alarm, pressure and great debate, war weariness had made it impossible for the United States to intervene with force in 1948-49 on behalf of Chiang Kai-shek's regime as it fell apart, partly under Communist onslaught, mostly from its own inner rot. This plunged America into the hysterical spasm of McCarthyism and the hunt for those who had "lost" China. But what the United States did do, as that spasm was at its height, was to go to the aid of the French and their puppet emperor Bao Dai in what had become a war for the control of Indochina.

When the French and their Vietnamese clients—Nguyen Van Thieu was an officer in their army—were defeated by the Communists at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 President Eisenhower managed to resist John Foster Dulles' appeal to him to rescue them by sending in American airpower. But in short course the Americans picked up where the French had been forced to leave off. It was as though no one remembered how a million Japanese had bogged down in China, and how the more recent American experience of stalemated war in Korea had led some of America's best military commanders—

Harold Isaacs, professor of political science at MIT and a former foreign correspondent, will publish *Idols of the Tribe* in June.

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MacArthur and Ridgeway—to warn the country never again to engage its forces on the Asian mainland. It was as though the experience with Chiang had taught us nothing about tying our fate to leaderships incapable of maintaining a viable base of support among their own people. In a short few years, the French war in Indochina became America's war, a war to hold a "line" in Southeast Asia against Communist China. Having avoided disaster in China, and barely escaped it in Korea, the United States plunged on resolutely to meet it this time in the morass of Vietnam.

It was a mordantly neat touch of historic punctuation, therefore, that death should come to Chiang Kai-shek, whose American-trained and equipped armies collapsed so ignominiously in China, during the very week that Nguyen Van Thieu's American-trained and equipped armies were collapsing, 26 years later and even more ignominiously, in Vietnam, yielding province after province in a pellmell flight that opened the way to a Communist takeover. It was a "coincidence" that would have been absurd dramatic license in art; it could only happen in nature.

Chiang Kai-shek lived out most of the years of his exile on Taiwan clinging to the hope that the Americans who "failed" him in 1949 would finally go to war against Communist China and enable him to realize the dream of the return that sustained him. Instead in 1971, the United States resumed relations with Communist China. The American President who had launched his political career by mercilessly pillorying those Americans who he said had "lost" Chiang Kai-shek's China ended up by "finding" Mao Tse-tung's.

This new twist in the turn of the power struggle abruptly made the "reason" for all the blood and sacrifice in Indochina inoperative. It had to be shredded or at least filed away until some new twist and new turn in the future required it to reappear. What had to be done now was to extricate the American forces from the Vietnamese morass into which they had sunk. This was accomplished with matchless cynicism and virtuoso skill by the Kissinger "peace agreement" that allowed the Americans to leave and the war to go on, for a "decent interval," to its foregone conclusion.

It was foregone because the Thieu leadership in Vietnam—and Lon Nol's in Cambodia—like Chiang's in China, was simply incapable of providing a viable political leadership with strong enough roots in the country and its people to maintain itself. The most disastrous of all the illusions that took us into this course of action was the belief that American power could fill the vacuum created by the weakness and failures of the leaders, classes, political parties and movements whom we found ready and willing to profit by allying themselves with our cause.

Unlike plays in the theater which do end, this one will go on and on. Beyond the bloody scenes yet to come, beyond the next intermission—some new "decent interval"—it is not too difficult to guess the opening scene of a new cycle to come: it will show some mini-Kissinger arriving secretly at a secret rendezvous—in Peking, perhaps, or Hanoi itself—to open negotiations with some mini-successor to Ho Chi Minh.

Memories of Defeat, Long Ago

by Kevin Buckley

During a visit to Vietnam in 1969 Joseph Alsop hosted a lunch for about a dozen young reporters and foreign service officers at a Saigon restaurant called Ramuntcho's. It was almost a very pleasant occasion. There was good food and good wine and the usual discussion and argument of what was happening in Vietnam and what would eventually happen. The talk was even more animated than usual because of Alsop's presence. While there were always sharp disagreements among resident Americans in Saigon hardly anyone at the table could agree with much of what Alsop had to say. But this was not surprising to anyone and Alsop's courtly, avuncular manner kept everything friendly for a while. The talk turned again and again to an issue of *Life* magazine that had recently appeared. The issue carried the photographs of 242 American soldiers—the casualties of one week of combat. The magazine had stunningly translated statistics into people and then into emotion. Would it have an effect in changing US policy? More argument. Alsop picked up the subject. The day would come, he said, when *Life* might very well run another collection of mug shots, this time of journalists. "The headline will be—'Who Lost the War in Vietnam?' "

That was one lunch, just one memory among thousands from a war that is now apparently drawing to a close. But it is worthy of mention for several reasons. The memory reminded me how much everyone in Vietnam wondered about the moment that is now at hand. People were always talking, predicting, guessing, dreaming—as they did that day—about how

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Kevin Buckley, former *Newsweek* correspondent in Vietnam, is writing a novel about Americans in the war.

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the war would end and what the consequences of that ending would be. People also talked about responsibility, about some future day of reckoning.

Optimists abounded in Vietnam. One school of thought, championed by former Deputy Ambassador Samuel Berger, was that South Vietnam was just another South Korea. It would all work out well in the end. One always heard Korean analogies. Once upon a time, people like Berger would say, the Koreans also had a terrible army. But it grew and got better. In fact it finally got to be so good there were two South Korean divisions fighting in Vietnam. Berger had served in Korea before coming to Vietnam and he regularly said that he saw all the signs of another South Korea emerging.

His boss, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, was equally sanguine. Democracy doesn't happen overnight, he was forever saying, and with time the Saigon government could stand on its own two feet. Bunker was especially optimistic about the long-term economic prospects and cited a report by David Lilienthal as proof. Bunker did not agree entirely with Lilienthal however. "He said that one Vietnamese is worth three Latinos," Bunker reported. "Well, I said the Vietnamese are very industrious but I have some Latinos in my family and I don't know about that comparison."

Optimism from Vietnam is an old story. Somebody was always making progress on some front. "Yes, we are making progress," William Colby told me one day in 1968. Then he was another deputy ambassador, in charge of the pacification program. "But we have always made progress here, right from the beginning. The trouble over the years has been that sometimes the enemy made more progress, and faster, than we did." Day to day, everything looked fine from the embassy's point of view. But the future—the long-term future? Some never admitted it, perhaps they never believed it; but throughout all the time I was in Vietnam there was a pervasive belief that eventually the Communists would rule Vietnam. The abruptness and speed of the current collapse are the only surprises.

In 1971, during the invasion of Laos, I attended an optimistic briefing at the US military headquarters. Then I waited near an airstrip with some other reporters and American officers for a ride to Khe Sanh. We had time to gaze at the sprawling base, the endless barracks, revetments and offices.

"What do you think they'll do with all this when they take over—make it some kind of a school, a training center?" asked a reporter. No one was surprised at the assumption behind his question.

"Ho Chi Minh U.," said one of the officers.

In a sense everyone knew it. Even a decade ago Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge spoke, rather murkily, of an eventual "murky Oriental solution" to the war. Later even "optimists" began talking about the "decent interval." That expression meant some face-saving time for America—probably "murky" with "Orientals" running things—between the American departure and the inevitable Communist rule. Even Alsop saw that future—in a paradoxical way. At the 1969 lunch he vigorously defended the correctness of American policy and argued vociferously against all comers that the Tet offensive of 1968 had been a great victory for the Americans and the Saigon government. But even as he was claiming victories, he was predicting the round-up of the culprits responsible for the eventual "loss."

There was a sense that someone had to be to blame for what was happening in Vietnam. But who? And to blame for what? There were all kinds of Americans in Vietnam and therefore all kinds of answers. Musing about that lunch led me to recall conversations I had with two American colonels. The first came at the end of a day spent visiting outposts and firebases in a part of Vietnam now controlled by the PRG. I returned with the colonel to his headquarters shortly before dusk. Outside his hootch there was a billboard that resembled an advertisement for the Community Chest or some fund-raising drive. There was a 10-foot-high thermometer drawn on the planks, marked from zero at the bottom to the goal of 5000 at the top. Red paint had filled in all but the last few inches. He explained that it was an "incentive" device. The numbers represented the kills recorded by his unit in their area of operations. The sign enabled the men to see what they were accomplishing. Furthermore there would be a prize for the man credited with the 5000th kill: a week off the line, free beer, Coke. Then a new drive would start.

It was dusk, cocktail hour, and the colonel poured out two glasses of sherry. Our talk wandered from the field operations to a recent article about Vietnam in *The New Yorker* and then to *The New Yorker* in general. That, and the sherry, gave his cramped, dusty quarters almost an academic air.

"You know what the problem is in Vietnam—or will be sometime soon," he said abruptly. "It's genocide. There will be genocide here among the Vietnamese. If they keep sending people down the trail, if they keep fighting around here, the Vietnamese will have genocide. I wonder if they ever think about what they're doing to themselves."

That was in 1968. Two years later I was talking to another colonel, about to assume the rank of general. This time we were drinking rice wine in a Saigon apartment. The talk meandered through the usual subjects—pacification, military balance, Saigon politics. He too changed the subject abruptly.

"What do you think, give me your honest opinion, about the possibility of war crimes trials after Vietnam . . . I mean trials of Americans. I want to know. There are precedents for these things in law—what we did after the war to the Japanese and Germans. Look at what's happened here—what's still happening. Direct attacks on civilian populations, planned that way, killing civilians by the thousands, cover-ups of those attacks. Will there be trials? Should there be? This bothers me. What do you think?"

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The End is the Beginning

by Frances FitzGerald

It is now exactly 25 years since the United States first entered the war in Indochina with a gift of military aid to the French. As the end draws near it is clear that the course of the war has had all the rigidity of a fugue: there are variations, but each event refers back to others in history, and the end is the beginning. In March the Communist troops seized control of the central highlands of South Vietnam; they had done the same in 1954 as they drove the French from the country. As it happened the ARVN commander of the highlands military region had fought with the French at Dien Bien Phu. As the offensive progressed Nguyen Van Thieu began to act more and more like Ngo Dinh Diem in the last months of his life: he refused all compromise, isolated himself more and more from his generals and waited passively, as it were, for a miracle. Ambassador Graham Martin clung to Thieu the way Ambassador Frederick Nolting had clung to Diem, offering no way for the Vietnamese to change the government by peaceful means and thus each day increasing the risk of assassination for Thieu, who waited until it no longer mattered to resign.

Like his four predecessors, President Ford could have ended the war with a political compromise. The stakes were, perhaps, lower but the way out was a good deal easier for him than it was for them. The North Vietnamese and the PRG had designed it that way in the political articles of the Paris peace accord. An ambush on three sides being so often their strategy, they kept the offer of a cease-fire and a political settlement open until the very end. But Ford refused that offer. He asked the ARVN to die at Xuan Loc the way the Eisenhower administration had asked the French to die at Dien Bien Phu, holding out a promise of military aid the way Nixon in 1954 had held out a promise of atom bombs. (Not one atom bomb, not three, but two.) Nothing, it seemed, but total defeat and the collapse of an army would do.

How to explain these repetitions of history? How to explain the rigid repetitiveness of American policy over 25 years? Quite clearly the policy of support for the war was not a simple mistake based on a misreading of the Indochinese. As the Pentagon papers show, not one of the five Presidents who supported intervention had any confidence that the war could be won. Certainly Ford and Nixon, if not Johnson and Kennedy as well, saw the end, however, far off. Their intelligence analysts erred on tactical matters, but they tended to be right about the essentials. They even made correct predictions about psychological events such as the Vietnamese reaction to an American withdrawal. The protection of Americans from angry mobs of "allied" soldiers and civilians figured in the Pentagon's contingency planning since 1965. American officials, of course, rarely dwelled on these gloomy predictions in public. And in a sense it was not Da Nang, the city, that fell some weeks ago, but the world of illusion they had created about the war. Many believed in the illusions, but it was with no real hope of success that five administrations proceeded on a course that led to the death of 55,000 Americans and the near-destruction of three Indochinese societies.

American policy is inexplicable in terms of Indochina alone, and indeed American officials often explained it in other ways. For 20 years or so they described it variously as an effort to stop communism, to contain China or to deter national liberation movements all around the world. With détente and the opening of relations with China, these explanations tended mysteriously to appear in reverse. All of a sudden the United States was actually helping China by continuing

"I guess it's time to pack a few pathetic necessities and bug out."

Frances FitzGerald, a free-lance writer, is the author of the Pulitzer prize-winning *The Fire in the Lake.*

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the war; alternatively it was helping the Soviet Union against China in Southeast Asia. President Nixon and Secretary Kissinger, however, took a new tack. As they explained it, the reasons for the war were intangibles: they were questions of "face" and "credibility" and the image of the United States around the world. With the beginning of the current offensive, Kissinger and Ford revived one of the oldest of the explanations—the domino theory—while at the same time adding a series of new ones: the Indochina war was, it seemed, "linked" to almost every foreign policy objective the United States had in the world with the result that the fall of Saigon might eventually mean the fall of Israel, Portugal and so on. To take all of this new rhetoric seriously is, of course, to imagine that Kissinger lives in some strange, metaphysical landscape where symbolic battles are fought over the future of civilization itself. To take it seriously is to believe that Kissinger looks at Indochina with the detachment of a schizophrenic.

The detachment, of course, is real. The rigidity and the brutality of American policy in Indochina has entirely to do with the fact that no American President has ever really cared what happened to the Indochinese. What is questionable is whether any other official explanation for the war is correct, whether in fact any administration pursued the war for genuine reasons of foreign policy. Conceivably Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson did, at least in part. But by linking the fall of Saigon to American "credibility" everywhere on earth, the Nixon and Ford administrations, guided by Henry Kissinger, seemed to detach themselves from all the other objectives of their foreign policy. As time passed it became more and more clear that their theories were but another kind of cover-up and that the war continued because a few cynical men wished to prove themselves right and to retain their old authority with the American public. They did not realize, of course, that it was too late—that Americans had rejected their theories and no longer cared. Isolated as Nguyen Van Thieu, they continued to play all of the old games with greater desperation. In the last few weeks of the war Kissinger, at least, indicated that he was ready to sacrifice not only more Vietnamese lives but much of American foreign policy in his battle with Congress.

Grand Illusion

by Stanley Karnow

Looking back through the mists of memory to my many years as a correspondent in Indochina, the dominant impression that lingers is one of disbelief that the US, dedicated as it is supposed to be to the preservation of human values, should have borne responsibility for one of the major human tragedies of modern times. Future historians will surely explore the depths of this phenomenon, but, within the scope of my own narrow horizon, it seems to me that our involvement in Indochina developed gradually, perhaps inexorably, out of a frustrating conflict between our ambitions and our capabilities. American policymakers, their mentalities shaped by Munich and the experience of World War II, slid into Vietnam with the conviction that US muscle could, in the name of defending freedom, halt the spread of communism anywhere in the world. They discovered, however, that the US could exert only minimal influence in a remote, alien land. Thus America's enormous power proved to be impotent.

The miscalculation did not stem from a master plan gone wrong. Instead it appears to me to have emerged from a series of improvisations and experiments, each devised to meet new and unforseen challenges. We extolled the first of our protégés, Ngo Dinh Diem, as the "miracle man of Asia" until, fearful that his ineptitude would play into the hands of the Communists, we encouraged his overthrow. We then backed the junta headed by Gen. Duong Van Minh, and, when he revealed himself to be more interested in playing tennis than running the government, we shifted our support to Nguyen Khanh, only to drop him and later build up Nguyen Van Thieu, who, perceiving that a client can dominate his patron, exacted a high price for his begrudging accommodation to US policy. Matching this search for stable Saigon leadership, American strategists meanwhile contrived fresh schemes that were guaranteed to become winning formulas. One of the earliest of these was a program to construct so-called "agrovilles," which, like the stockades of American pioneers, would provide the Vietnamese peasants with security. These were transformed into "strategic hamlets," which, American officials assured us, would revolutionize the rural population of Vietnam, and, in the process, both weaken the Vietcong and force the Saigon oligarchy to reform. Neither of these notions worked, largely because Vietnamese peasants are loathe to leave their villages. American and South Vietnamese bombing of the countryside afterward achieved the desired effect. It drove hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese peasants into urban refugee camps, thereby denying the Communists access to the people. It also disrupted Vietnamese society, turning it

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into a rabble of displaced persons.

There was, as I observed, an equally experimental quality to the American military approach in Vietnam. The first senior officer I knew in Saigon back in the 1950s was the chief of the US Military Advisory Group, Lt. Gen. Sam Williams, a leathery type known as "Hanging Sam" because he had presided over the execution of the Nazi war criminals as commandant of the Nuremberg jail. He helped Diem to build and equip a roadbound army that would be more effective against internal uprisings than against the Vietcong. But as the Vietcong grew in strength, Washington realized that it could not be stopped by conventional tactics. Hence the "counterinsurgency" fad was promoted by the Kennedy administration, which saw in this innovation an opportunity to undermine the "massive retaliation" concepts of the Eisenhower era and, at the same time, spawn a new breed of American soldier prepared to cope with "brushfire wars." The personification of this new breed were the "Green Berets," those romantic figures destined to use Communist methods against Communists in jungle conflicts from Laos to Venezuela. I remember one American general saying as he switched to the fashion: "Why, our forefathers were guerrillas against the British long before communism even existed." But this approach failed, and ultimately we escalated to the deployment of American troops in big units, with B-52s flying overhead, as the Saigon wits quipped: "We don't have a cure for the common cold so let's run it up to pneumonia." That failed too.

Nobody of any stature would dare to consider the possibility of failure because, as we all knew, Americans could not fail. I recall, in 1961, Robert Kennedy cutting short my attempt to discuss Vietnam with the excuse that "we've got 20 Vietnams a day to handle at the White House." Lyndon Johnson also had a limited attention span on the subject in those days, when he was Vice President. Flying out of Saigon with him after he had referred to Diem as the "Winston Churchill of Asia," I asked Johnson why he had lavished such praise on a leader whose position was pretty shaky. "Shit," Johnson replied, "now you know he's the only boy we got out there." As late as 1966, a year after American troops were fighting in Vietnam, I found US politicians reluctant to face an issue that had not yet hit them directly. "Only a dozen boys from my constituency have been killed so far," a West Coast congressman told me at the time. "When the number gets up to a hundred I'll have to think about what to say."

In fairness to these cases of myopia, I should add that nobody among the correspondents who covered Vietnam during that period, myself included, opposed the US involvement as such. If we were critical of Diem and his lunatic sister-in-law, Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, it was primarily because we believed that they were hampering the war effort. Only a handful of journalists, among them Joseph Kraft and I. F. Stone, would qualify as having been "premature doves." It may be that by not visiting Vietnam regularly their sense of perspective was keener.

Saigon before the American machine rolled in was a pleasant, leafy city reminiscent in many ways of a French provincial town—even though, beneath the surface, it was a venal place. The US ambassador in the late 1950s was Elbridge Durbrow, an amiable diplomat whose wife would occasionally wear an *ao-dai* as a gesture of solidarity with "our Vietnamese friends." His successor, Frederick Nolting, began by functioning on the theory that he could store up credit with Diem that could be redeemed when Washington sought South Vietnam's cooperation on key questions. Nolting often found, however, that his credit was worthless when he tried to draw on it. He was replaced by Henry Cabot Lodge, who adroitly encouraged the ouster of Diem but could not persuade the new regime under Gen. Duong Van Minh to stir. Maxwell Taylor, who followed Lodge, made an important change. Impatient with the slowness of the Vietnamese, who lacked his brisk pace, he reorganized the US mission in order to report progress even though none was taking place. As a consequence the American establishment in Vietnam ballooned, and by the time US troops were fighting in 1965, the war had grown into a huge organizational operation. But with all this, Vietnam never became an American colony in the fullest sense. Even US envoys like Ellsworth Bunker and Graham Martin, whose relations with the Saigon regime were close, could not issue instructions to Nguyen Van Thieu and his cabinet, and so there were limitations to their authority. This was apparent in 1968, when Thieu haggled about the shape of the table at the Paris peace talks as a way of stalling until Richard Nixon, whom he considered sympathetic to his cause, could take office. It was also apparent in March, when Thieu undertook his disastrous withdrawal of forces from the highlands without consulting Martin, or, as far as I gather, any other senior US official.

Viewing the Vietnam experience in retrospect, however, procedures seem to have been irrelevant, since neither we nor our South Vietnamese allies were merely drifting without any clearcut goals. We repeatedly talked about peace, but offered the Communists no reasonable grounds for compromise until late 1972, when Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho worked out a deal under which North Vietnam could keep 145,000 troops in the South in the exchange for the release of the American prisoners held in Hanoi. The main flaw in that deal was that the US did nothing to compel Thieu to reach a political settlement with the Vietcong. On the contrary the secret and public pledges made by Washington to Thieu served to reinforce his intransigence and prompt the Communists to turn to military action in order to accomplish their aims. Even so the success of the Communists has been less the result of their military drive than their filling the void

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left by Thieu's own inability to manage his army. But then the story of Vietnam is a collection of bungles that would be funny if the lives of people had not been at stake. I remember Gen. Paul Harkins, the US commander in Saigon, telling me privately that former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was being "too pessimistic" in predicting that Americans would be out of Vietnam by Christmas of 1965. I remember Gen. William Westmoreland saying, on the eve of the Tet offensive in 1968, that "it's the beginning of a great defeat for the enemy," and I recall Joseph Alsop backing him up with the assertion that "any hunch of General Westmoreland must be profoundly respected." And, of course, we were told by Richard Nixon in 1973 that he had attained "peace with honor."

Our grand illusion after the Paris accords of 1973 was that the South Vietnamese could defend themselves against an eventual Communist offensive without benefit of US firepower. Those who believed this to be possible must have been dreaming, since we knew throughout the war that, despite the proclaimed success of Vietnamization, the Saigon government could not stand up against the Communists and Vietcong without direct US participation. But even if the US had remained in Vietnam, the ultimate outcome in my estimation would have been disastrous—for reasons that were delineated not by Ho Chi Minh but by Marshal Tran Hung Dao, the Vietnamese military leader who drove the Mongols out of Vietnam in the 13th century. His words might serve as an epitaph to the US commitment:

> *The enemy must fight his battles far from home for a long time . . . We must weaken him by drawing him into protracted campaigns . . . When the enemy is away from home for a long time and produces no victories and families learn of their dead, then the enemy population at home becomes dissatisfied and considers it a Mandate from Heaven that the armies be recalled. Time is always in our favor. Our climate, mountains and jungles discourage the enemy, but for us they offer both sanctuary and a place from which to attack.*

Pushing Sand

by Richard Holbrooke

For at least eight years it seemed reasonable to me to assume that sooner or later, no matter what we did in Vietnam, things would end badly for us. This feeling was not based on any desire to see us humiliated, or any feeling that the other side represented the forces of goodness and light; it just seemed that the only way to stave off an eventual Communist victory was with an open-ended, and therefore endless, application of American firepower in support of the South Vietnamese regime. No matter how much force we were willing to use, this would not end the war, only prevent Saigon's defeat. And the human suffering would be bottomless. The war would go on until the North Vietnamese achieved their objectives. As Ho Chi Minh tried to tell the French 30 years ago, his forces would outlast everyone else—by one day.

The end was inevitable, and our efforts to avoid or delay it were wrongheaded and against everyone's interests—political, strategic, humanitarian, even (to use a phrase so rarely invoked in Washington) moral.

But even believing that, as many other people also did, I was almost totally unprepared for the dimensions and speed of the tragedy that began unfolding in Indochina a few weeks ago. It seemed reasonable to expect the offensive in South Vietnam to come in 1976, timed to coincide with the presidential elections here, as had the last two great offensives, in 1968 and 1972. It also seemed reasonable to suppose that there would be some intelligence warning that it was coming.

"You can't believe how bad things are around here," a friend working in the administration told me on the day Pnompenh fell. "We are simply and totally without leadership, and the situation in Indochina is so horrible. . . ." His voice trailed off, and I said, "I know." "No, you don't," he replied. "It's worse than you think."

There are a large number of things that need to be said about the present drama in Indochina. Some of them must await the end; others require time and a little distance. We must, for example, begin to look beyond Indochina, and toward the question of the proper role of the United States in Asia and in the rest of the world. Reports of the imminent demise of American influence around the world, many of them emanating curiously from high administration officials, are clearly very premature. So too is the effort to portray the Democratic Congress as a group of crazy isolationists who are thwarting Henry Kissinger's grand design for a generation of peace. Many Democratic "doves" are deeply concerned lest recent events be misunderstood, and stand ready to clarify to the world what our real national interests should be. But in

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the current debate one can hear clearly the opening salvos of a presidential campaign in which, for the first time since 1948, "the role of Congress" will be a major issue. And with that as background noise, it is not surprising that the present relationship between administration loyalists and Congress will be dyed through and through with distrust and hostility.

But these are issues to discuss some other day. These are days for those who lived in Indochina to be jarred anew each morning as they pick up their newspapers, to be shaken each night as they watch television. For each of those obscure place names means something to some American, and it is worth remembering what we tried to do out there, and how we tried, and how we failed.

My own images, three years after I last visited Vietnam, six years after I last worked on the area in the government, nine years after I last lived there, are mostly of the wild, weird contrast between the people of Vietnam and the Americans who had come to help them. The distance between them seemed immense, unbridgeable, with all the good will in the world. The other day, as I went up an escalator in the Pentagon, I ran smack into a huge photograph on the wall of an army officer standing in a rice paddy, in combat fatigues, hand on hip, M-16 on his shoulder, looking squarely and confidently into the camera. Behind him strung out across the paddy, slightly out of focus, were South Vietnamese soldiers, presumably the ones in the unit he was advising. The plaque under the photograph said "Vietnam 1964." The look of confidence on that man's face somehow went through me and brought back other rice paddies, other false hopes.

I remember a trip with the Ninth Marine Regiment through the area south of Da Nang in 1965, about eight months after the marines had landed. Their original plans had called for the establishment of a beachhead in the Da Nang area, then the gradual sweep outward into the surrounding countryside, westward and southward, pacifying the area, that is, cleansing it of Vietcong. Then the South Vietnamese would take over behind them as they moved forward.

That was the plan, and kneeling in some sand in a tiny hamlet south of Da Nang, Gen. Lewis Walt, the commander of the Marine Amphibious Force, showed me how it would work. Walt was a powerful and unforgettable figure, a man who looked the way you would want a marine to look. He was one of the true heroes of the marine corps' fight through the South Pacific in World War II, and he was impossible to dislike. He was also the wrong man for the job, and besides, it was the wrong job. He was pushing the sand in front of his hand in a wide semicircle, and explaining that the marines would push the Vietcong out in the same way. All around us curious children watched this giant of a man pushing sand around, and chattered in Vietnamese. "But the VC will just move in behind you," I offered; having lived in Vietnam for several years, it was not hard to see the flaw in the concept. But Walt persisted in his belief, and went right on pushing sand, literally and figuratively, for the remainder of his command.

The Ninth Marine Regiment carried with it its battle flags from past wars, and while I do not remember them in detail I do remember that the impression they made on me was profoundly moving. Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima—the names seemed so historic—and here they were somewhere between Da Nang and Hoi An; even they didn't know where. We walked to a hamlet where the marines had helped build a schoolhouse for the children, and as we approached, the regimental commander proudly told me how there had been no school here before the marines came, but now they had a schoolhouse and a teacher. This was the way the marines would win the hearts and minds (the phrase was actually used, it must be remembered) of the people.

When we got to the schoolhouse it was burned down. A young marine captain, company commander, explained to his superior that one of the children—they didn't know which one—had burned it to the ground a few hours earlier. The marines puzzled over that a while, but couldn't understand it. Why would anyone want to burn down the school?

We went on to another hamlet, where the marines had already been for several months. They knew all the people in the hamlet and were obviously very popular with them. Everyone came out and waved and spoke a few words of English. I was told by the marines that they would be leaving this hamlet soon to go on, but that this was still a secret. A few minutes later a Vietnamese girl came up to me and said, in half-English, half-Vietnamese, "Why the 3/9 [the actual battalion designation for that unit in that hamlet] go? We want them stay."

The marines interpreted that as a sign of their success, but it was really a sign of their trap. They would be either liked and therefore trapped because the people would not like the South Vietnamese troops who would replace them; or they would be hated and the schools they built burned down. Or, in fact, they would be both at once—liked for their strange generosity and naiveness, for the money that came with them; and hated for their heavyhanded ways, for their lack of understanding, for their use of the women (who of course invited it in many cases), for simply not belonging in South Vietnam at all.

These stories are about the marines, but they could have been about any Americans. Only a very few understood where they were, and they could not, no matter how well placed they were, influence the behavior and policies of a 500,000-man expeditionary force.

Our behavior in Vietnam can be judged on many levels. In historic and global terms, it stands under examination as a part of a worldwide policy, and will be

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judged on that basis. In domestic terms it will be judged for what it did to our national soul, to our self-image, which will not be the same again. In Vietnam itself, which is what concerns me here, it was the most curious mixture of high idealism and stupidity, of deceit and self-deceit, of moving heroism and inexcusable cruelty. For a long time I tried to separate out these contradictory strains, to understand why some things seemed right and some others seemed wrong, to see also if there was any way that some good could come out of the whole mess. But then finally it all seemed to come down to one simple, horrible truth: we didn't belong there, we had no business doing what we were doing, even the good parts of it.

The POWs

by Chester L. Cooper

When future historians set out to trace the course of the Vietnam war they may find that a definitive turning point was reached during a few months in mid-1966. From that point on the men of Hanoi must have realized that they could not lose. It is worth rehearsing the events of those months for they explain a great deal about the agreement that was reached in 1973.

In mid-April 1966 the Strategic Air Command was given a chance it had been seeking for the past several months—the B-52s would now be making regular bombing runs over North Vietnam. The air force would have a chance to demonstrate that it, too, had a role to play in "limited war." The awesome power of the "Flying Fortresses" was soon demonstrated; in late June the bombers struck oil installations in Hanoi and Haiphong. Damage was heavy and by no means confined to the primary targets. There were civilian casualties; there were losses of planes and crews. Two weeks later Hanoi announced that captured American airmen were to be tried as "war criminals." A massive campaign was promptly launched from Washington to apply pressure on the North Vietnamese to call off the trial. A mixed but impressive bag of international leaders, administration officials, American pacifists, a score of "doves" in the Senate, the Pope and U Thant appealed to and/or warned Hanoi. By the end of July Ho Chi Minh announced that there would be no trial.

The Americans had won the battle of the war crimes. But in the process the North Vietnamese had gained a critical piece of intelligence: American prisoners were an extremely important weapon. And as the war went on and the bombing of North Vietnam intensified, more airmen were taken captive.

The North Vietnamese exploited their growing arsenal with great skill. By ignoring the terms of the Geneva Convention, even to the point of refusing to release a list of the prisoners they held, they fueled American anxiety. By exhibiting a handful of POWs to selected foreign visitors, they fed a growing popular determination to extricate the captured men.

During the summer of 1968 the POWs were playing an important, if unwitting, role in American politics. And the issue of a prisoner exchange became a principal point on the negotiating agenda of the American delegation to the peace talks that were just starting in Paris. By 1970 freeing American prisoners became, paradoxically, a reason for continuing the war.

This was Henry Kissinger's legacy as he began his secret meetings with his counterpart from Hanoi. By the autumn of 1972, with a presidential election at hand and another wartime Christmas looming, the 500 American POWs must have provided considerable negotiating leverage for the North Vietnamese. The meetings in October came to naught, but when they were resumed after the first of the year, progress was swift and a cease-fire agreement emerged late in January. The last contingent of American troops and the POWs were soon on their way home. But remaining behind in Vietnam were 150,000 North Vietnamese soldiers—almost 100 times the number there when the United States first became militarily involved, eight years before. The cease-fire arrangement was, at best, a fragile one; only the hopelessly naive would have expected either Hanoi or Saigon to observe it, or the puny International Commission to enforce it.

Americans have a right to be saddened, but not surprised by what has happened. Saigon's chronic inability to attract the support of the Vietnamese people made the Communists a long-term favorite in the ultimate outcome. And the outpouring of American concern for the POWs gave Hanoi a tremendous negotiating advantage in the contrived "peace."

There is a somber lesson for Americans in all this: we must recognize that American military assistance cannot compensate for fatal political weaknesses. And before we once again commit our troops to battle, we must reckon the total cost of war: the maimed, the dead—and the prisoners.

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The Secret War

by George McT. Kahin

In assessing American policy in Cambodia it is not sufficient to judge the legitimacy of Lon Nol's regime simply on the basis of its having been overwhelmingly dependent from the outset upon the US Treasury. More important is the fact that its origins were tied to a covert and subversive American intervention aimed at displacing Sihanouk's neutralist government by one willing to align itself with US strategic objectives.

The key features in this Nixon-Kissinger policy can best be understood against the background of earlier American attempts to destabilize Sihanouk's government. These go back at least to 1958 and were centered on building up an oppositionist military force known as the Khmer Serei (Free Cambodians), led by Son Ngoc Thanh, a bitter opponent of Sihanouk. Recruited primarily from South Vietnam's large Cambodian minority (Khmer Krom), this force was armed, financed and trained by the CIA and later supervised by US army special forces. Operating from bases in Thailand and South Vietnam, these troops were by the mid-1960s successful enough in penetrating Cambodia's frontiers to tie up a substantial part of the small 30,000-man Royal Cambodian Army. On a visit to Cambodia in 1967, during which I visited one of the border areas, I found that these Khmer Serei operations were regarded by the diplomatic community in Pnompenh as aimed at keeping a counterforce available in case the United States might want to use it against Sihanouk, while more immediately keeping pressure on him to ensure against his departing too far from an international posture acceptable to the United States. In fact this policy had already backfired and become a major reason for Sihanouk's decision in 1965 to break diplomatic relations with the United States.

During the last year of the Johnson administration, the counterproductivity of American support of military opposition to Sihanouk had become evident, and although the Khmer Serei were not disbanded, Washington and Pnompenh moved toward a rapprochement. Sihanouk, worried over Cambodia's deteriorating relations with China during the Cultural Revolution and desirous of keeping the mounting air and ground war in Vietnam away from his border areas, welcomed improved relations with the United States, and ultimately on June 11, 1969, a resumption of diplomatic ties was announced.

Under continual US prodding during the last months of the Johnson and the first months of the Nixon administrations Sihanouk began to take actions helpful to the US military position in Vietnam. Although not extensive, these included public criticism of Communist Vietnamese occupation of border base enclaves and actions calculated to reduce the flow of overseas supplies to them via Cambodian ports. Ironically, however desirous he may have been to reduce the flow of military supplies and food to NLF and Hanoi forces, Sihanouk could in fact do little because of the deep involvement in this traffic by Lon Nol, Sosthenes Fernandez and other highly placed Cambodian army officers who were unwilling to give up their lucrative roles as middlemen. While Sihanouk apparently acquiesced to American demands that the US be permitted to carry out hot pursuit of Vietnamese Communist troops a short distance into Cambodia, it is quite certain that he would never have tolerated anything like the all-out American military invasion against the border bases of the PRG and North Vietnam subsequently approved by his successor, Lon Nol. In any case Sihanouk's concessions were evidently not sufficient to satisfy the Nixon administration.

By at least the early fall of 1969 plans had been set in motion that led to the ousting of Sihanouk. There is no doubt that there was considerable dissatisfaction with his rule among much of Cambodia's urban civilian elite, as well as in the officer corps. But it is inconceivable that those who mounted the coup of March 18, 1970 against Sihanouk would have dared move against him had they not believed that prompt US recognition and support would be forthcoming. However irrational Lon Nol may have seemed in recent years, it is impossible to believe that without advance assurance of American military backing he would have acted immediately after the coup to challenge Hanoi and the PRG by sacking their embassies and ordering their military forces to leave Cambodian soil within 48 hours. But this move was necessary to set the stage for the American invasion aimed at ousting North Vietnamese and PRG forces from their border bases, for which the US military command in Saigon had been pressing.

Whether or not American personnel were directly involved in the coup against Sihanouk, US mercenaries were. During the course of the year preceding it, under the aegis of Gen. Lon Nol there occurred a series of what were officially described as "rallyings" of some 2000 of the CIA-supported Khmer Serei to the Royal Cambodian Army and police. Infiltrated under Lon Nol's direction into a number of key army and police units, they were later to emerge as the main activists among the anti-Sihanouk forces which sacked the

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Hanoi and PRG embassies and applied the pressure necessary to cow some of the Cambodian deputies into voting for Sihanouk's removal.

These CIA mercenaries were in fact rallying not to Sihanouk, but to Gen. Lon Nol, and on terms worked out between Lon Nol and the head of the Khmer Serei, Son Ngoc Thanh, in negotiations that probably began as early as September 1969 (soon after the unsuspecting Sihanouk had appointed Lon Nol as his prime minister). It is appropriate that these Khmer Serei "ralliers" have been termed a "Trojan Horse"—but a Trojan Horse, it should be noted, that was paid for by the United States and presumably directed by its agents. That there had been an understanding respecting further US support if Lon Nol should encounter difficulties is suggested by the promptness with which the United States sent him military reinforcements of additional US-trained and financed Khmer Krom from South Vietnam after the coup. Within a few weeks approximately 4800 of these men, seconded from either Saigon's army or directly from the American-led Khmer Krom Mike Forces, were flown into Pnompenh aboard US planes. ("Mike Force," short for Mobile Strike Force, was an elite military element trained and advised by US special forces, and often drawn from South Vietnamese minority groups—Cambodian or Montagnard.) Presumably the Khmer Krom involved in the riots against the PRG in the Cambodian border province of Svey Rieng 10 days before the coup were also US Mike Force personnel, sent directly across the border from US bases in South Vietnam. According to Son Ngoc Thanh, the Khmer Serei's leader with whom I spoke in mid-1971, the total American-trained and financed Khmer Krom—including Khmer Serei, Mike Force and others—who had by then been infused into the Royal Cambodian Army were in excess of 10,000, with the US still providing their pay. Ngo Cong Duc, former Saigon government congressman from South Vietnam's Vinh Binh province, recently told me that from his province alone approximately 7000 Khmer Krom soldiers from the ARVN, led by three lieutenant colonels, were dispatched to Pnompenh shortly after the anti-Sihanouk coup. If Mike Forces are included, he estimates that ultimately a total of 30,000 Khmer Krom soldiers from South Vietnam were sent to fight in Cambodia.

United States intervention in Cambodian affairs helped cut out the middle ground and push people of a variety of political convictions toward the standard of opposition provided by Prince Sihanouk and the National United Front. This was reflected as early as August 1971 in a talk I had with Gen. In Tam, then Minister of Security and Internal Affairs in Lon Nol's government. He estimated the existing strength of the armed opposition at about 10,000, of whom he classified 3000 to 4000 as Khmer Rouge (pro-Communist). For the other 6000 to 7000 he used a term that he translated for me, a little sheepishly, as "Cambodians striving against being under American occupation." The whole of this Cambodian opposition is now bound together in a broad coalition—the National United Front of Cambodia—that must enjoy a political base far broader than Lon Nol ever had. If the present administration is now to approach Cambodia in terms of political reality, it should acknowledge this and act accordingly.

Myths and Interests

by Adam Yarmolinsky

It was one of John Kennedy's recurrent nightmares that he might find himself a survivor of a nuclear holocaust, asking his companions, "How did it all happen?" We survivors of the holocaust in Southeast Asia find ourselves in similar circumstance, and no quantity of refugee ferry flights, no Saigon airlift, can stay that question.

If people need to understand the sources of their irrational behavior in order not to repeat it, countries need to all the more, since they are less easily restrained by external means. And if we conclude that we were dragged into Vietnam by the military, or stayed there as long as we did because we were misled by the military, then we may find ourselves contemplating a similar scene of desolation a generation hence, asking the same question—if anyone is alive to ask it.

Myths tend to come in matching pairs. The right-wing myth—now being energetically propounded by Barry Goldwater—that the civilians would not allow the military to win the war, is matched by the liberal myth that the military would not allow the civilians to stop the war, or at least bamboozled the civilians into going on with it. The fact is that responsible civilian officials knew just what was going on in Southeast Asia. As Robert McNamara observed as he politely cut off his first formal staff briefing as Secretary of Defense (which, as I recall, reported fighting in the Plain of Jars), "we all read the newspapers."

What the civilians didn't know was the domestic

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political reaction to giving up. And four successive Presidents have tried to postpone that discovery by whatever means they could find. It is still too early to tell what the reaction will amount to. But we can already observe the fascinating spectacle of an administration pushing against the weight of popular opinion, in order to avoid what it fears will be an unpopular result.

The sum of popular reactions is almost certain to be ambiguous enough so that no politician would be willing to risk his future on a repetition of the same behavior patterns. The only lesson anyone can safely draw is that we ought to try to avoid ending up in a situation where our only reason for carrying on with a military intervention is that we are afraid of the domestic political consequences of getting out. It follows that we ought not to begin what we may not be prepared to finish.

Fortunately or unfortunately—and I would suppose fortunately for most of the world—military intervention on the cheap is no longer possible. When the United States first went into Vietnam, it wasn't a real war to the people who made the decisions. It was rather, in their view, a necessary if not painful exercise of national will. And when they discovered the war was real, it was too late. They had made a commitment, not to whoever happened to be occupying the presidential palace in Saigon, but to the American electorate, and to what passes for the world community, from which it took a decade to extricate ourselves.

The ultimate result in Vietnam should have been predictable in advance, simply because no reasonable American statesman could, with a straight face, argue in the councils of state that whether Ho Chi Minh or Ngo Dinh Diem exercised the fragile authority emanating from Saigon was a matter affecting the most vital interests of the United States. And if American political leaders didn't believe it, there was no reason why North Vietnamese political leaders should believe it either. The North Vietnamese must have known too that the embarrassment of not winning might be enough to keep us in the war for a long time, accepting and inflicting incredible human costs. But it wouldn't be enough by itself to give us the will to win, at a politically unacceptable cost in American casualties, and a morally unacceptable cost in still further destruction of another country and its people.

The result was not widely predicted because we did not understand the costs, for a number of reasons. These reasons included the general euphoria about the use of military force that pervaded Washington after the abandonment of the frightening doctrine of massive retaliation, as well as the residue that remained from the Dullesian visions of the monolithic nature of world communism. We supposed that somehow we could easily fight limited wars in other people's jungles, and that Moscow could easily turn on and off the fighting in other people's countries.

The age of innocence is over now, and no one—not even Gerald Ford—still claims to be able to see a light at the end of the tunnel. "No more Vietnams" used to be a fashionable slogan. But the maxim about learning history in order to avoid repeating it implies that events do not recur in easily recognizable patterns; otherwise there would be very little to learn.

One commentator has already distinguished the Arabian peninsula from the Indochinese peninsula because it lacks extensive tree cover. If the United States contemplates a cheap and easy war to protect its Middle East oil supplies—doubtfully a vital national interest—we risk another Vietnam, without foliage. But there are still some things for which the United States must be prepared to pay any price. If the United States can decide what really are its vital interests in the Middle East and can make clear its decisions, then other nations are much more likely to respect those interests—and we should not have to pay either the price of victory or the price of ignominy.

The Sulking Giant

by Stanley Hoffmann

At the time of the 1973 "peace" agreements, commentators liked to discuss the "lessons of Vietnam." Today, when one reads many of the statements provoked by the latest, if not the last, inevitable act of the tragedy, and especially the President's remarks, one cannot help feeling that those who had the most to learn have been taught nothing at all. They still believe that all it would have taken for "our side" to win was more American will, guts, power. Had we kept our "commitment," the good guys would have prevailed. And so, once more, self-denunciation substitutes for self-criticism, and the very people who warned us most solemnly about the peril of a right-wing backlash should we "bug out," are

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now busy trying to provoke it.

At the cost, therefore, of repeating oneself, one must once again go back to the roots of our mistake. The first one was the belief that in the battle between an opponent with a formidable will, the advantage of geography, patience and available supplies, and a "friend" who showed neither ability nor determination to turn his people into a national community, American power could redress the balance. All it could do was delay the outcome. The 1973 agreements seemed like a triumph for Kissinger's 1968 scheme: it was a military truce between us and Hanoi, leaving political issues to Hanoi and Saigon. But it can now be seen for what it was: a screen behind which we got out, inevitably leaving Hanoi in place. What half a million American troops and our air power had only slowed down could not be contained forever by mere American military aid. The equation has not changed in 12 or 15 years.

A different outcome would have required either the physical annihilation of North Vietnam, obliterated from the air or occupied on the ground—but we never wanted to incur the costs and risks of such an operation, precisely because our interests were limited—or else, the establishment in South Vietnam of a genuine nation. But the very forces on which we relied and which we maintained in power were the least capable of such a feat. In their absence our proclamation of support to a "nation fighting for its freedom" became an exercise in self-deception and ventriloquy. We kept projecting on South Vietnam a pattern that had been genuine in Europe and in Korea. There were, indeed, groups and people fighting for freedom from communism, but there never was a general will or a national regime. Having, in effect, given up trying to create one, yet not having given up the hope of "holding" South Vietnam militarily, we have merely held back the flood at a terrifying human cost. We have combined the ineffective and the destructive, the futile and the corrupt. As Elliot Richardson has suggested in an interview in Boston, surely the same result could have been achieved sooner at less cost. We are the last who should speak of a bloodbath. Rarely has there been such an example of a moral disaster resulting from radically flawed political premises.

There was no elegant way of climbing out of the wreckage. Once the original mistake had been made, the more men and money we threw into the inferno, the more we made sure that the end would be dreadful for us, and even more so for those with whom we shared the illusion of ultimate salvation. To stop all aid while they keep fighting is indeed a callous act. But to keep feeding the flames, while pretending at this late stage that our supplies might "stabilize" the situation long enough to provide for the negotiated political settlement which we never sought to achieve in the days when Thieu seemed in firm control is equally callous. When we decided to maintain by all means short of the risk of a general war the cliques and factions that relied on us, we made sure that we would have only a choice between ignominious endings. But, as one of the most pro-American French journalists has put it, once one has made a mistake, one does not have to persevere in it forever in order to protect one's good word.

At least there was no need to make the end even worse by proclaiming what could be called a self-domino theory. There was no need to weaken our own credibility by asserting that our failure to do the impossible in Vietnam affected our capability to do the possible and the necessary elsewhere. However, that we would indulge in such absurd and self-destructive rhetoric was implicit in our second original mistake. We saw in Hanoi an arm of "international communism," one head of a single if multiheaded hydra. We had to prove that the "free world" would not yield any more, and we believed that the only way to cope with the hydra was to do battle. Today we have reached accommodation with several Communist powers: not only Yugoslavia or Rumania, but China. We realize that Communist diversity means at least varying degrees of hostility between them and us, and chances of tension among them. However we have not lost our instinctive tendency to oversimplify and overdramatize unfavorable trends. We may have become more sophisticated about "Asian communism" (although the hand-wringing of those who view with alarm the tendency of Thailand or the Philippines to question the value of US bases shows that in many minds the confusion between the necessary global balance of military might and universal military containment persists). But when a "threat" appears elsewhere, we are still prone to see dominoes falling, and prompt at imagining violent replies. Thus many officials fear the "domino" effect of Portugal, even though the events in Portugal are clearly hurting Communists in Spain, Italy and France.

In this respect Vietnam should teach us an important lesson. On the one hand Hanoi is one of several among the poorest nations in the world that have tried or will try to create a collectivist society, based on principles that are repugnant to us, yet likely to produce greater welfare and security for its people than any local alternative ever offered, at a cost in freedom that affects a small elite. On the other hand many states, whatever their regimes and societies, are now beginning to challenge the international economic order that was established by the non-Communist industrial powers after World War II and benefited them more than it has served the rest of the world. We have to learn, first, that we shall not be able to cope with such changes and demands by force and subversion; secondly, that whether we face a common front of enemies or not depends largely on our own response. To declare our hostility at the outset, to act as "the United States in opposition" (to use Prof. Moynihan's expression), is a recipe for disaster, for this would

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contribute to turning a rhetorical common front into an effective one, and strain relations with our own allies. Thirdly, we will have to realize that among those who challenge the past economic order there are many of our own best political and economic clients, and among those whose social model is most shocking to us there are not only Communists but other kinds of leftists as well.

In other words our failure in Vietnam should force us to face seriously at last what is perhaps the most difficult proposition for Americans to accept: that even though much of the world admires our technology, envies our standard of living, or respects our might, the American model cannot be easily exported and is not relevant to huge parts of mankind. To see in other nations' efforts at shaping their own societies or a new international economic order a declaration of war *on us* would be both the apex of egocentrism and diplomatic suicide.

We must pursue accommodation. This means, of course, neither selling out the security of our threatened friends, whether in Israel or in Western Europe, nor ceasing to defend our own economic interests. But it does mean giving up our flattering self-image as a desired model, and our deep conviction that the methods that have made America great—the free market, the giant corporation, aggressive individualism, the two-party system—are ideal for all mankind. If we keep seeing ourselves as universal, we shall end up isolated. Whenever we find ourselves, or think we find ourselves faced with a hostile world, we either want to repudiate the world altogether, or to react with force—two forms of vain impatience with uncertainty and the frustrations of involvement. If instead we see ourselves as we are, the strongest military and economic power in a world of growing diversity and rising demands for broader participation, our chances of waging a wise diplomacy will be preserved, our chances for negotiating mutually beneficial deals will be enhanced.

This is no longer a world that one nation can control, or in which one nation alone can direct the traffic and trace the roads. At present the least we can say is that we are too deeply mired in the past to have begun to envisage the future. It is not surprising that reactions in Congress are often confused and contradictory. Rather than denouncing Congress and haranguing the public in indignant tones, the administration ought to try to create a consensus around a new and sensible policy. But is it capable of reeducating itself, of repudiating what is obsolete, of reintroducing candor and trust around what is necessary? And if not, who is there in the opposition willing and able to do the job?

Hubris, National and Personal

by Anthony Lewis

"A nation cannot remain great if it betrays its allies and lets down its friends. Our defeat and humiliation in South Vietnam without question would promote recklessness in the councils of those great powers who have not yet abandoned their goals of world conquest."

Thus Richard Nixon in his first major presidential address on Vietnam: November 3, 1969. The words were the words of Nixon—greatness, defeat, humiliation—but the hands were the hands of Henry Kissinger. That America must not be seen to lose in Vietnam has been a central Kissinger theme, from his *Foreign Affairs* article of January 1969 to his statement on March 26, 1975, that to "destroy an ally by withholding aid from it" would have a "cataclysmic . . . impact on the United States' position in the world."

The rush to an ending in Southeast Asia evokes so many thoughts and emotions that it is hard to sort them out. But high on the list, for Americans, must be painful awareness of our hubris—the overweening arrogance that made us persist for so long in pursuit of folly, and to make policy not in terms of horror visited on the people of Indochina but in terms of our image, our face.

Now hubris has come to its classic reckoning. A respected British commentator, David Watt of the *Financial Times*, went far back in history to measure the fall. The collapse in Vietnam, he wrote, "is the most poignant demonstration of the vanity of human wishes that fate and military incompetence have contrived since the destruction of the Athenian expedition to Sicily."

On May 8, 1950 President Truman and Secretary of State Acheson decided to aid the French in their war against Ho Chi Minh. For 25 years since then American leaders have been relentlessly—madly is not too strong a word—chasing the illusion that outside force could impose on Vietnam our notion of order. As each stage of policy failed the leaders raised the stakes, investing more of their own prestige and their country's. And finally when it was impossible to save face any more, when everyone could see the illusion for what it was,

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Henry Kissinger acted like a child with a wounded ego exaggerating his loss. "Look how unreliable we are," he told the world in effect. "Look at the disaster our perfidy has caused."

Mr. Kissinger is the most extraordinary example of the obsession that has gripped American policymakers for a generation. It is possible to understand how, in Stalin's day, Dean Acheson and Harry Truman could think it was necessary to aid French colonialism in order to fight monolithic world communism. It is sadly possible, too, to understand how Lyndon Johnson was led to make Vietnam the test of his manhood.

But by 1969 reason and experience surely gave adequate warning against the delusions of past American policy in Vietnam. Communism was no longer monolithic, and no serious person could argue that North Vietnam had to be fought in order to draw the line on Chinese Communist expansion. The fatuous military optimism of the American experts ("The other side is near collapse. I'll show you the charts. The charts are very good."—Walt Rostow, 1967) had been exploded in Tet 1968. Politically no one could underestimate the will of North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front, or rationally maintain that Nguyen Van Thieu had an equivalent democratic magnetism. Above all Vietnam was so clearly a trap for the United States, draining our substance with no hope of "victory" except by total, genocidal destruction of North Vietnam—bombing it back to the stone age.

If anyone should have understood all that, it was Henry Kissinger. When he left for Washington in 1969 he told his Cambridge friends to stop protesting and stop worrying—America would be out of the war in six months. His friends were sure of one thing: Henry was smart enough not to get trapped in Vietnam as so many others had. When the Washington press asked him how he was going to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, he disarmed the audience by saying he hoped to make his own new mistakes. What went wrong?

The men of the Nixon administration—like their predecessors, but with less excuse—were blinded to the realities of Vietnam by considerations of politics and of ego, national and personal. The pattern was set in a single speech, that of November 3, 1969. If ever disaster had a proximate cause, it was there in that speech. The policy it disclosed, and the character of the policymakers, assured six more years of destruction in Indochina and division in America, ending in horror.

Until that night, many expected Nixon promptly to liquidate a war that was not his. Instead in personalized rhetoric he said he was willing to risk "allowing Johnson's war to become Nixon's war" rather than let America suffer the "defeat" that would result from a "precipitate" withdrawal from Vietnam. He did not put a definitive end to the US role, or move toward a political settlement. Instead he said forces would be withdrawn gradually—but warned that if "the level of enemy activity" increased, the United States would act. In short "Vietnamization" and a continuing American threat were to do what massive US ground forces had not been able to do: hold the line. It was a policy of victory by other means.

What is especially interesting is that Nixon saw it in terms of domestic politics: he had found a way of quieting opposition to the war, he thought, without giving way to the doves. We know that from Jeb Magruder's *An American Life*. On November 5, 1969, two days after that speech, Nixon told staff members delightedly that he had "floored those liberal sons-of-bitches with the TV speech . . . We've got those liberal bastards on the run now; we've got them on the run and we're going to keep them on the run."

At the time it was easy to see the Vietnam policy as an expression of Richard Nixon's ideology or desired self-image of toughness. Henry Kissinger, we thought, was too smart to believe in the ghost of victory in Vietnam. We were wrong. He disguised it better, but he believed as much as Nixon in victory of a sort. He talked privately of a "decent interval" before political change in South Vietnam. That turned out to mean the maintenance of the Thieu Government or its equivalent in Saigon at least as long as Kissinger was in Washington.

Cambodia provided the definitive insight into Kissinger's attitude. Alone among the senior Nixon foreign affairs advisers, Kissinger favored the "incursion" in 1970. He dismissed the objections of five of his own assistants who foresaw precisely what would result: a widened war, physical and political damage in Cambodia, increased division at home. Just before the President spoke on the evening of April 30 ("If, when the chips are down, the US acts like a pitiful helpless giant . . ."), Kissinger briefed White House staff members. As reported in William Safire's *Before the Fall*, he said: "The point is, we won't play the game on the Communists' rules. Anyone who wants to negotiate a peace must hang tough. If we get through this, we should have a negotiation by July or August."

The Cambodian episode was also instructive in what it showed about the use of deception as an instrument of policy. At that White House staff meeting before the Nixon speech, members were given a briefing paper prepared by Kissinger's National Security Council staff. "This is not a long-term 'quicksand' operation that would lead to a new 'Vietnam situation' in Cambodia," it said. "It . . . is not in reply to any of Lon Nol's requests for aid." Thus in private the policymakers were giving the same assurances the President gave in public—that there was no idea of American intervention in Cambodia's quarrels. The assurances were not worth a bucket of warm spit. Before long American arms were flowing to Lon Nol and B-52s were bombing all of Cambodia. The cruellest and most unnecessary scene in the long drama of the Indochina war had begun.

When a group of Kissinger's former Harvard

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colleagues went down to express their objections to the Cambodian invasion, he told them: "Suppose I went in and told the President I was resigning. He could have a heart attack and you'd have Spiro Agnew as President. Do you want that?" The necessary premise of that statement was that Kissinger personally shared their doubts about Cambodia, which was untrue. Later Kissinger told a news magazine that the group had threatened to keep him from returning to Harvard, which was not only untrue but absurd.

The particular instances of deception are less important for themselves than for their revelation of character, which in the great inevitably affects events. A person so concerned with power, so sensitive in ego that he would play the twister with his old university friends would not surprise us by agreeing to (approving? suggesting?) wiretaps on his own staff. Nor by pressing on with an increasingly self-destructive military effort in Cambodia rather than admit the failure of a policy—rejecting Chinese overtures for political compromise as recently as last summer. Nor by keeping in Saigon an ambassador so fixed on his own delusions of strength that he would hold up arrangements for the safe evacuation of Americans. Nor by warning for years that a Communist takeover in Saigon might arouse a right-wing reaction in this country—and then, when his policy crumbled, making statements designed to increase recrimination.

What makes it all so amazing in the case of Henry Kissinger is that he ought to have known better. Impressive intelligence was not enough to save him. He walked on into the trap of Vietnam—and on and on and on. And now it is too late for his reputation. He knows that he will be remembered less as the builder of detente than as the destroyer of Cambodia.

But Henry Kissinger is only the latest and most extravagant of a long line of American policymakers destroyed by hubris over Vietnam: Presidents, cabinet members, national security advisers, ambassadors, generals. And so no one has to ask whether there may be involved here something deeper than a fault in particular individuals. Do these 25 years mean that there is a fundamental flaw of pride in our national character? Or is there something in our institutions, in our political system as it has developed, that kept successive officials in the grip of a disastrous policy, each maintaining in the teeth of reason, experience and humanity that it would at last "work"?

Well, I am an optimist; I think Americans can learn, and have learned from the tragedy of Indochina. We know much more now about the danger of concentrated executive power—especially when it is exercised in secrecy and deception, so that there can be no effective political check. We have begun to learn that we should care more about the character of our leaders than about their cleverness. "The massive lies involved in the Asian policy," the London *Sunday Times* said, "have done as much to damage American society and America's reputation as the failure of the policy itself . . . Congress is seeking more than revenge. It is expressing the blunt impatience of the people." Finally the American public, a very large part of it, has learned that imposing our social and political assumptions on people of a sharply different culture will not work; and that is a tremendous change.

Still the hardiest optimist must be discouraged when a President and a Secretary of State remain so much less able than most of the public to understand and accept reality in Indochina. For a President to say in the year 1975 that we must send more arms in order to build a position for negotiation. It is like the Bourbons, learning nothing and forgetting nothing. Accident can explain much about the quality of our leadership—the accident of assassinations and other crimes. But it does seem incredible that, nine years after Charles de Gaulle spoke at Pnompenh, we do not yet have a chosen American leader ready to accept his wisdom: "For the United States, with its power, wealth and prestige, to give up a far-away expedition from the moment it proved without justification . . . would in no way finally injure its pride, thwart its ideals or jeopardize its interests. On the contrary . . . what respect would not the United States recover throughout the world and what chances would not be retrieved for peace . . .?"

"It's a deal. Winner takes all."

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The Elite Protects Itself

by Hans Morgenthau

There can be no more salutary experience for an American observer of the world scene than to forego, at least for a while, the conditioning routines of starting the day with reading *The New York Times* and listening to the nation's leaders on TV, and to go abroad in order to read and listen to what foreigners have to say about the US. In *The New York Times* we have been treated to the insolence of Sir Robert Thomson, a British expert on guerrilla war who, together with Thieu, has indicted us for treason. The President and the Secretary of State have told us that since we have defaulted on our commitments to South Vietnam and Cambodia, our friends have ceased to trust us and our enemies no longer fear us. To top it all off Prof. Walt Rostow, with a scholarly eye for the simple solution to a complex problem, has suggested again that we send the marines.

It is a strange and almost exhilarating experience to escape from this morally and politically polluted atmosphere of home and to behold America, at least for a little while, as it appears to foreigners, who have no ax to grind and do not feel compelled to denigrate America in a vain attempt to erase their own misdeeds from the records of history. With the exception of the London *Economist*, which has always had a tendency to exaggerate both American virtues and vices, I have not seen in any serious European or Israeli publication a reference to the decline of America's power, to lack of trust in America's commitments or to the domino theory as a valid analysis of world politics.

Thus opinion abroad sees in the American disengagement from Indochina but a specific instance of the general principle that all commitments among nations are subject to the clause *rebus sic stantibus*, that is, they change with circumstances. Hence the friends and allies of the US are neither surprised nor disheartened by the collapse of American policy in Indochina. While they have been too cautious to say so openly, they have been convinced for a long time that that policy had no chance to succeed. It has been considered to be doomed not because of America's reluctance to meet commitments but because of the irremediable weakness of the regime to whose survival we were committed. It has not been lost on outside observers, in spite of official rhetoric to the contrary, that these regimes either owed their very existence or at least their temporary survival to America's intervention. That is to say, we did not come to the aid of viable regimes threatened by subversion or aggression, but we created our sustained unviable regimes for the purpose of being able to assist them. We could never have committed ourselves to Diem or Thieu if we had not first put them into position as recipients of our commitments. It is the fraudulent character of this relationship—making a Quisling regime play the role of a sovereign government to whose support another government can be committed—that renders the Indochina debacle inappropriate as a precedent for the relations between the US and its friends and allies.

However the Indochina debacle carries new lessons for the relations between the United States and its friends and allies. A new dimension is added to the doubt which, as we have seen, weakens any commitment between nations by the possibility that the execution of the commitments may lead to a nuclear war. It is possible, for instance, that at the beginning of the Kennedy presidency the US would have lived up to the commitments to defend the Western presence in West Berlin even at a risk of nuclear war, but it cannot be taken for granted. For the risk would have implied not only the traditional liabilities of warfare but the various survival of the belligerents.

It follows from these starts that the ultimate protection of a nation's interest must be sought not in the commitment of another nation to its protection but in the indigenous strength of the nation concerned. In other words a commitment can add to the preexisting indigenous strength, it cannot serve as a substitute.

Comparing the American assessment of America's power and credibility with that of the outside world one becomes painfully aware of the extent to which our leaders for psychological and political reasons of their own have propagated the idea of a declining and unreliable America. Our leaders have almost gone to the length of warning the outside world against trusting the word of the US. Fortunately for us the outside world has refused to take that warning seriously. What the outside world doubts is neither America's power nor its reliability, but the capacity of its leaders to lead and, more particularly, to lead wisely. In that doubt the outside world is joined by the dominant weight of America's domestic opinion. As concerns the reaction of the outside world, the exact opposite of what the administration appears to believe is true. The persistence of a succession of administrations to seek an unobtainable victory in Vietnam, far from buttressing America's prestige, has served to damage it. The present administration, instead of bemoaning the largely imaginary consequences of the Indochina debacle, ought to be grateful that this burden will finally be lifted from its shoulders and regret only that it has been lacking in the wisdom and courage of

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deciding upon lifting the burden itself.

To address these criticisms to a succession of America's administrations is not to indulge in "recriminations," obviously a taboo in a conformist society, but to practice at least a modicum of common sense. If a team of physicians had given you consistently the wrong diagnosis, prescribed the wrong therapy and reassured you with the wrong prognosis, you would be a fool not to change physicians.

The Indochina debacle is rooted in moral and intellectual deficiencies in which, regardless of the party or administration in power, the members of the ruling elite of America share. They have a natural interest in preventing "recriminations," that is, the exposures of their personal deficiencies and of the misdeeds resulting from them. To first invent and then bemoan the decline of America's power and credibility deflects attention from the real causes of the disaster and, by doing so, preserves the credit of ruling elite and protects its hold on power.

Lies and Whimpers

by Ronald Steel

This is the way it ends. Not with a big bang, as many had feared. And not with an embarrassed sigh of relief, as others had hoped. But with veiled accusations and self-justifying whimpers from an administration that finds the buck can no longer be passed on.

This is what Kissinger and Nixon, their various minions and dimly remembered predecessors, labored so fervently to stave off. This is why they consigned thousands of Americans and unnumbered Vietnamese to die, why they devastated bucolic Cambodia and defiled the principles Americans thought they were upholding. Not because they believed that the "national interest"—that useful formula for justifying the unspeakable by incantations of the unnameable—was at stake. The pretenses for that had long since passed. Rather it had come down to something far more simple. Nobody wanted to be the one caught holding the bag.

Everybody knew that Vietnam had to go. Even the administration had ceased pretending to believe its own rhetoric. No one could remember why we went in there in the first place, why we ravaged that hapless country and wrenched the social fabric of our own, or why we did not have the decency to leave it alone once our folly stared us in the face.

So at last it is all coming to an end. Not with glory, or drums beating, or even a "decent interval." But the collapse of a regime rotted from within, with raping and pillaging by the soldiers of a demoralized army, with the panicked surge of a people fleeing war, with the frantic efforts of "America's friends," to use Henry Kissinger's words, to ship several tons of gold to Zurich before they themselves retire to such havens as the Côte d'Azur or Hawaii.

It is not really surprising that those who fought in Vietnam no longer—according to reporters who interview them in taverns and softball lots—care what happens there. They want to expunge it from their minds, to be done with it, to pretend—at least those who did not return maimed or the loved ones who did not return at all—that it never happened.

This is the final collapse, and many strange things are happening. Not only in Saigon, where a corpse has disintegrated, but also in Washington, where our political leaders seek to stave off the consequences of their own folly.

Thus Henry Kissinger sonorously attempts to pin the blame on a war-weary Congress for the collapse of his client regime in Saigon and hypocritically weeps for the "honor" of a nation that will not honor the secret promises he made to bring Americans back into the war. Had Congress not rebelled last year and forbade a new military intervention, American planes would once again be bombing North and South Vietnam, and American soldiers would once again be dying in a cause that was lost before it began.

It is not merely distasteful to hear the architect of the nation's diplomacy whining to Congress about his "moral commitments" to a venal regime of torturers and war profiteers. Nor is it merely disquieting to observe him trying to justify the secret accords he hid from Congress and the American people because he knew they would never be tolerated. We are used to lies from our public officials, and particularly from the current Secretary of State.

What is most disturbing, however, is the cynicism that hides behind these lies. We know that even he, indeed especially he, does not believe them. We know—even those who tried so hard and for so long to doubt it—that there is nothing behind those noble words and facile tears but a desperate effort to avoid the taint of personal defeat.

This is cynicism that goes beyond the bounds of what even we—accustomed to three decades of the adven-

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tures of an imperial presidency—can accept as tolerable. It is a cynicism that is insidiously subversive, for it corrodes the bonds of trust between a nation and its leaders. Without that trust democracy founders in anarchism or degenerates into plebescites.

There is a time when a nation, for its own health, as well as its self-respect, can no longer tolerate such lying and cynical manipulation by its public officials. That time has come. The longer it is delayed the harder it will be to bring the government into line with a reality that its citizens long ago accepted.

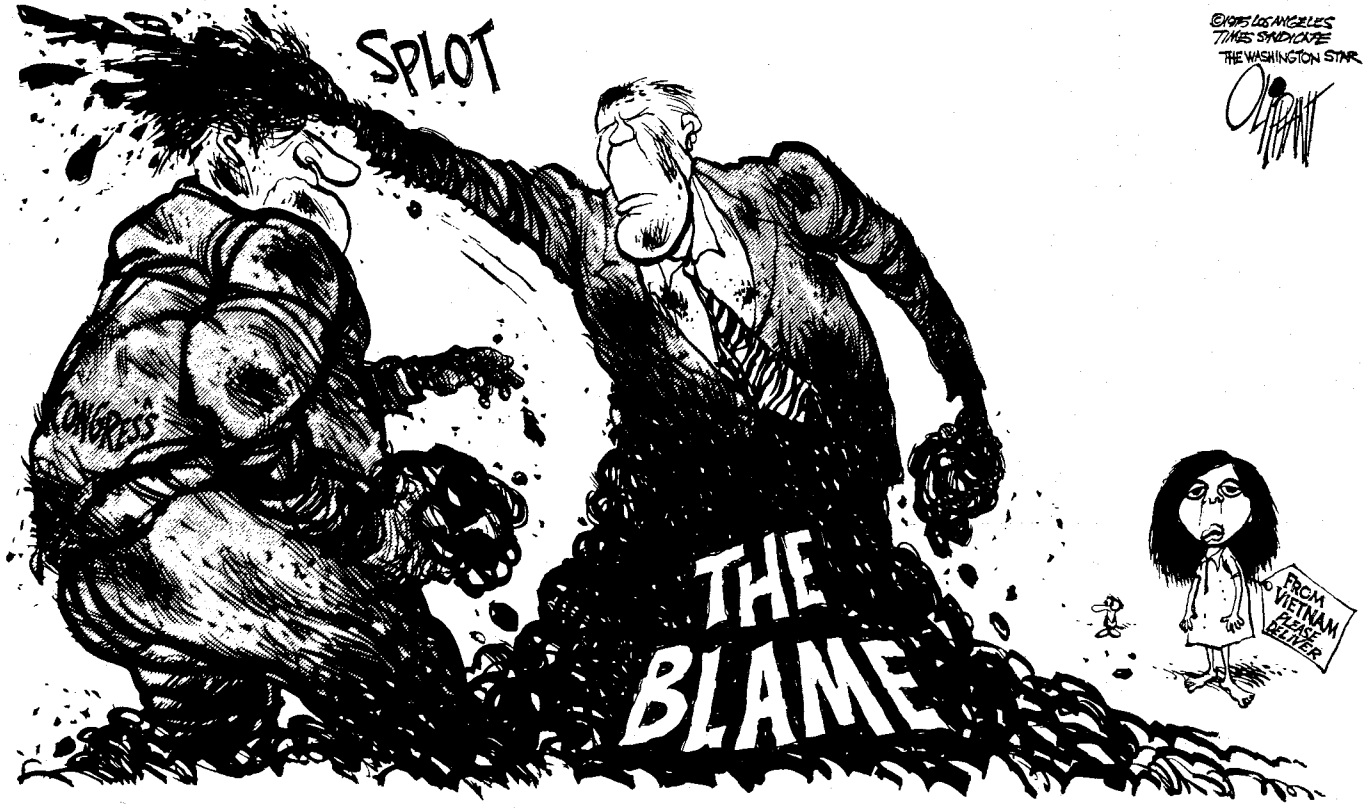
It is time to go, Henry Kissinger. Time to acknowledge that there is no longer any support—not in the nation and not even in the Congress—for a sleight-of-hand diplomacy based on deception and public relations. Time to recognize that for all their fanfare, the achievements have been chimerical: a "truce" in Indochina that has prolonged the killing and destruction for six years for no better reason than to save the Nixon administration from embarrassment; a "disengagement" in the Middle East that impedes any true settlement by translating a regional struggle into a Cold War confrontation; and a "détente" that is yet to have any effect either on the military budget or on the use of American power to overthrow governments dedicated to social revolution.

It is bad, though not uncommon, for a nation to be dragged into a "glorious adventure" simply to stake out an imperial claim against its rivals. It is worse when a futile war is perpetuated because no leader is willing to take the responsibility for ending it ingloriously. But it is intolerable for the public officials of a democratic society to make secret agreements to commit that society to the resumption of a war it had already disavowed. This is what Kissinger did in promising Thieu that he would resume the bombing if the regime in Saigon were to founder. It is because of these secrets and these lies, of this betrayal of a public trust, of this refusal to accept the limits of manipulation in a democratic society that Henry Kissinger must go.

His case is not unique. A quarter century ago Dean Acheson, deciding that he would "liberate" North Korea once the invaders had been driven from the south, found himself involved in a war with China that he could neither win nor end, except on terms that would have been personally embarrassing. Refusing to acknowledge defeat, he clung tenaciously to office for two years after his usefulness as Secretary of State had come to an end. He had lost the respect of Congress and his credibility among the people, yet his pride would not let him go and the President would not relieve him. The nation suffered and the Korean war dragged on until a new President and a new party came into power and ended it.

At the time Walter Lippmann, whose early admiration for Acheson had turned to skepticism and finally to opposition as his policies became increasingly obsessive and inflexible, wrote caustically of his "hope that Mr. Acheson will write a book explaining how he persuaded himself to believe that a government could be conducted without the support of the people."

It is time for Henry Kissinger to retire—while there are still prestigious campuses that would like to receive him—to write such a book and explain what even his steadily diminishing band of admirers find increasingly incomprehensible.



"I think I've seen enough mud!"

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Reappraisal Without Agony

by James Chace

Walter Lippmann over a generation ago laid down as a fundamental principle of a wise foreign policy that it be solvent. By this he meant the need to bring into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, a nation's commitments and a nation's power. Whenever the United States has pursued the opposite course the result has been a foreign policy failure. This is as true of our overcommitment in Indochina as it was between World War I and World War II when our commitments had been enlarged and our power relatively diminished. In attaining a solvent foreign policy, however, Lippmann asserted that a nation must not only possess sufficient military strength to wage war successfully; a policymaker also needs "the force he can muster at home combined with the support he can find abroad among other nations which have similar ideals, interests and ambitions."

This is a quite different notion of foreign policy from what the Ford administration has put forth in the wake of the collapse in Indochina. In this instance the American people have been warned that not to support South Vietnam with three-quarters of a billion dollars more of military aid is to put into question our commitments elsewhere, despite our earlier expenditure of $150 billion and 56,000 American lives. In fact the more plausible reading of our tragic involvement in Indochina is that Washington had if anything overcommitted its financial and military resources in an area whose actual strategic importance to the United States has always been marginal. The problem is not, as Secretary of State Kissinger claimed in his news conference of March 26, what kind of people we are, but rather whether we are trying to pursue an insolvent foreign policy.

Rather than indulge in a welter of recrimination and warnings of a return to isolationism, American leadership should make a sensible—not an agonizing—reappraisal of our foreign commitments. Americans are aware that it would be best for the future if the country were to take an active role in world affairs, like it or not. A recent Louis Harris poll sponsored by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations revealed that support for an activist foreign policy has hardly changed since 1947, when 68 percent responded affirmatively; in 1974, 66 percent still supported this policy. And when asked what future role America should play in the world, 62 percent responded that a decade hence we should play "at least as important and powerful role as today." The Harris survey also demonstrated far less support for the use of US troops abroad, but a wariness of interventionism does not imply a drift toward neo-isolationism. Thus support for a truly solvent foreign policy is there; the likelihood of its eroding is far greater if our leaders cling to verbal cant and unfulfillable commitments.

Secretary Kissinger in his March 26 press conference declared that peace is indivisible (just as he had some months earlier labeled detente indivisible) and he said that the United States cannot pursue a policy of "selective reliability." One is forced to ask, what exactly does he mean? Surely the essence of foreign policy is the realization that commitments to different nations are of different caliber and importance. Moreover, war can break out in a part of the world where the United States might have the deepest moral commitment—as it did in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968—and yet the US might still find itself unable to intervene effectively on the side of freedom and friendship. The correlation, according to the Secretary, appears to be that if we cannot give military aid to South Vietnam with, in his words, "no terminal date," we are abandoning our friends. Such an abandonment in one part of the world apparently jeopardizes "the security of friends everywhere."

If by this he means that Congress' unwillingness to provide $722 million in military aid for the Saigon government implies that the United States is unwilling to support Israel, for example, he is simply wrong. Indeed, to quote the ubiquitous Louis Harris again, a poll published in *The New York Times* of April 6 demonstrated that there was substantial support (66 percent) for military assistance to Israel. Similar support for Western Europe and Japan has been woven into the fabric of American postwar foreign policy attitudes. Such support is both moral and political, and while it cannot and should not be engraved in stone any more than alliances should be considered perpetual, to imply that the final American extrication from Indochina means that our word is not to be trusted is to misread history.

Former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt spoke wisely when he recently dismissed as groundless fears that a refusal by the United States to provide military aid for Indochina would provoke Europeans to question America's commitments to Western Europe. It is precisely the bringing into balance of commitments and resources that makes our remaining commitments valid. If anything, most West Europeans, long weary of America's distraction from traditional geopolitical areas of interest, are relieved that US power and

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political will can be once again put into proper balance. Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger was closer to the truth than Kissinger when he stated that "the credibility problems are primarily localized. . . . One cannot generalize from that specific locale all over the world in the same degree." Yet even his statement fell short of an accurate appraisal of what is happening in Southeast Asia. The establishment of better relations by Thailand and the Philippines with China was already in train prior to the Communist offensive this year. With the opening to China by the Nixon administration, the whole balance-of-power equation in Southeast Asia and the Pacific was undergoing radical revision.

As for Europe, it fair to say that the United States acted tardily in trying to mediate the dispute over Cyprus, but it is also true that Great Britain refused to act decisively on Cyprus, and West Germany may have been hesitant to bring to bear its influence in Ankara. Indeed here was a case for close coordination between the West Europeans and the United States. Such a policy—what the French call concertation—might well be the focus of a deliberate initiative toward Europe in which America would look to its European allies as necessary coalition partners dealing with an area such as the Mediterranean, a vital interest to all the Western powers.

In this particular foreign policy checklist, the rapidly evolving situation in Portugal concerns all the members of the Atlantic Alliance. To encourage democracy in Portugal certain steps might have been made and might still be made by the European community in concert with the United States. Consideration of Portugal's association with the community should be of the highest priority; and in this respect US political and economic posture toward the Lisbon government could prove major determinants.

Finally, in defining our global engagement, particular attention should be paid to improving North-South relations; in the United Nations, for example, consistently treating the group of 77 "developing" nations as a bloc encourages confrontation. The aim of US policy should be to avoid a world of blocs, not least because it is in no one's economic interest to do otherwise.

In the creation of a sensible American foreign policy, nothing would appear more divisive than for the administration to blame Congress for the tragedy in Southeast Asia. Congress is simply reflecting the sense of priorities that the American public supports. If the administration, in the wake of what appears to be a Communist victory in Cambodia and Vietnam, accuses a Democratic Congress of irresponsibility in not providing further military assistance for Indochina, the heritage will be a bitter one. The real tragedy is that this legacy may inhibit any meaningful reassessment of American foreign policy commitments for years to come.

The Nixon administration wisely moved the United States out of the era of confrontation that characterized the Cold War. It rightly mitigated the adversary relationships that prevailed between the United States and the Soviet Union and China. At the same time Nixon and Kissinger overplayed the notion of linkage that stressed the interrelationship of the United States and the Soviet Union on a global level and tended to project the US-USSR balance onto regional situations such as Chile and Bangladesh where it may not have applied. But having sensibly perceived the need to reorient American foreign policy away from a narrowly conceived, moralistic anti-communism to a more realistic framework of operations, Kissinger's role is surely to help us tailor our commitments more exactly to our capabilities. This, in turn, could ease the previous, almost intolerable strains on the domestic fabric of our society. America does not lack political will. What the nation needs is leadership than can provide a solvent foreign policy. The alternative to bringing America's ends and means into balance, need one point out, is bankruptcy.

From a Former Ally

by Dong Duc Khoi

The resignation of Nguyen Van Thieu was typical of the entire story of Vietnam: it came too late, following a period of American equivocation that choked off any chance of salvaging the situation.

After the unruly retreat of the South Vietnamese forces from the highlands on March 22, there was ample time for a vigorous reshuffling of the army command, and for shaping a strategy that could have effectively stopped the offensive of the Communist forces. Most probably, Saigon would have lost the two provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien, but the ARVN could have shown sufficient resistance to destroy a big chunk of Communist strength and delay their advance

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for months. A continued offensive might then have appeared a much more risky enterprise to the Communists. But only the Americans could have made this happen.

In 1967, former American Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker practically hand-picked Thieu among the budding warlords to be the man on whom not only the destiny of the Vietnamese nation, but also the fate of the costliest American endeavor in foreign policy was to rest. The choice had not been a particularly judicious one: Thieu had the litheness of a maître d'hôtel and the silly smile that always went with it, but he had no other qualification than his deference to the aging ambassador. It was discovered later that Thieu had a penchant for larceny and deception, which undoubtedly accounted for Nixon's remark that he was among the four or five most talented politicians in the world. Ambassador Bunker would later regret his choice, for Thieu did not spare him several instances of extreme embarrassment as the US sought to render the Vietnamese presidency politically as well as militarily impregnable. Bunker's successor, Graham Martin, who was said to have been selected for the job because he had little or no experience in Vietnamese affairs, could do little else than follow the book. He did so with zeal, lending reality to the mock slogan coined by Robert Shaplen, a reporter long acquainted with the Vietnam scene: "See it through with Nguyen Van Thieu."

But in these Ides of March, Nguyen Van Thieu was not functioning either as the president of the republic or as the commander-in-chief. As he sat alone in his palace, paralyzed by shock, the South Vietnamese army ran ahead of its own shadow in self-inflicted rout. Not a single attempt to stop the debacle was made over a period of 10 days. Thieu angrily rejected suggestions by army and political leaders to yield even a portion of the military command, but instead ordered the police to arrest his opponents. Within three fateful weeks 20 provinces, six army divisions and one billion dollars worth of military supplies were lost. Thieu's gains were the arrest of three senators, one judge, four lawyers and two journalists, all with unimpeachable anti-Communist credentials.

All this was well known in Washington. No American official would dispute the urgent need for a change in the Saigon leadership if South Vietnam were to avert Communist control. But no move was made. Washington was in recess in those hours of extreme danger. Ron Nessen was arguing with irrefutable logic that, had the President abstained from playing golf in Palm Springs, things would still be bad in Vietnam. Henry Kissinger was somewhere in the skies, serenely disclosing his regrets at having misread the trends in the Congress. The only action took place in Saigon: Ambassador Martin held on to Thieu for dear life, against all logic, against the will of the Vietnamese nation, against time, which was running out.

One often wonders why American leaders have laid out courses of action that seemed doomed to fail, and why they have reacted so ineptly each time a crisis has threatened an enterprise that had already cost the US enormous losses in lives and treasure. There are probably many reasons for this phenomenon, but I can only offer a partial answer. The American leaders have never arrived at a stable definition of their rationale in handling international situations with doctrinal implications. In other words American diplomacy does not seem capable of identifying the aspirations of other peoples, and of designing the proper answers to those aspirations.

Consider the history of American mistakes in Vietnam. In a world boiling with nationalistic fervor in the wake of World War II, the Americans chose to back the French effort to reconquer their Indochinese colony. Then, when it became clear that colonialism for freedom could not work, the American leaders turned to nationalism, but once again they found themselves behind the times. Ngo Dinh Diem, whom the Americans flew home from his retreat in the Maryknoll monastery, was undeniably a patriot. But he also was a melange of medieval autocracy, of religious fanaticism, and totally ignorant of the socioeconomic imperatives of his nation. The feudal republic met its end in a bloody coup in 1963. By that time the resentment against the American-protected regime had reached formidable proportions, affording a propitious terrain for the Communists to extend their influence.

Now the Americans sought to meet the Communist challenge head-on with direct involvement of American forces on the battlefields. But this could last only as long as it was tolerated by US public opinion. The following chapter, American disengagement from Vietnam, contained even more contradictions than any of the previous episodes. The much heralded Vietnamization program was designed to replace a half-million American troops, well trained, well equipped, well fed, protected by a giant armada of naval and air power, with 200,000 Vietnamese peasant recruits, underpaid, undertrained, and deprived of the American protective shield.

In the South there was little spirit. The sense of nationhood had all but disappeared following six years of collaboration with a foreign army. The Vietnamese people and soldiers had lost their dignity and their self-reliance; they had acquired the debilitating taste for luxury and idleness. A few Vietnamese became aware of this danger and tried to turn the course of events away from the abyss: their efforts were not welcomed by the Americans, and they were discarded as ultra-nationalists or "unfriendly elements."

So by the time the Communist tanks pushed down Highway One last March, the unprincipled South Vietnamese troops had lost the only mystique they had ever had: their belief in the superiority of American equipment. They fled.

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Peace: A New Experience

by Gerald Hickey

When the guns of the Vietnam war have at last fallen silent, the peace that follows will be a new and in many respects strange experience for a whole generation of Vietnamese. The conflict that began in 1945 has continued until the present and since 1960 it has been an ever-ascending spiral of violence that has touched everyone in that sad country. At first it was the Vietnamese peasants and Montagnard tribesmen who fled their tranquil villages as war crashed in on them from surrounding fields and forests and even from the skies above. As one Vietnamese farmer put it, "We were as helpless as fish on the chopping block." In the highlands I saw the death and destruction in a Rhadé village after it was bombed by the Americans and the gore in a Bahnar village following an attack by the North Vietnamese who threw grenades into the bunkers where women and children huddled.

Then with the Tet offensive early in 1968, the sheltered security of the cities vanished as fighting took place in the streets of Saigon, Hue, Can Tho and other urban centers. Barricaded in their elegant villas the war profiteers could find little consolation in imported luxury goods that surrounded them. But it was far worse for the poor in their flimsy houses when fire swept through their crowded neighborhoods.

The Easter offensive of 1972 compounded the horror. The northern provinces were emptied of their populations and the cities of Quang Tri and An Loc were completely destroyed. In the highlands the B-52 bombings drove entire ethnic groups from their traditional territories. Ironically the masses of refugees on the coast and in the mountains were crammed into sprawling bases left by the American military who were withdrawing from Vietnam. At Camp Enari, the former US Fourth Infantry Division headquarters near Pleiku, the smoke from the Montagnard refugees' cooking fires blackened signs still announcing "Mail Call at 0900" and "Movies Tonight at 2000."

In January 1973 the Paris peace agreements were signed but peace did not come to Vietnam. The fighting continued and an ever-increasing number of young men of all backgrounds were drawn into the military service. On the streets of towns and cities, military funerals and vans of wounded veterans with missing limbs became common sights. The wartime boom brought on by massive American spending ended, and the economy, already disrupted, deteriorated further. Symbolically the gaudy neon signs in the thousands of GI bars that had given Vietnamese cities the look of tacky carnivals were extinguished. Unemployment began to rise as did the price of staples such as rice, fish and vegetables. Most Vietnamese suddenly found they had been living beyond their means; they had gotten used to the sugar, cooking oil, transistor radios, motorcycles and other consumer goods that had been brought in through the American aid program to be sold at low prices so as to "soak up piasters" and thus avoid a runaway wartime inflation.

But now in May 1975 we're in the midst of the worst debacle of the war, and the anguish it has brought to the Vietnamese can be seen daily on our television sets. These are, one hopes, the last days of the long years of war, and when they are ended peace will come to Vietnam.

Regardless of how the war ends, those in the government will face monumental tasks in the reconstruction of the country and rehabilitation of the Vietnamese people. While there is considerable physical damage in parts of the country, it can be repaired. Fortunately the airfields, port facilities, roads and bridges built by the Americans are for the most part intact. The economy, however, has been dealt a serious blow in the current crisis. Capital is leaving Vietnam, and plans for economic investment are being shelved. At the same time urban populations are swelling with the influx of refugees. And when the fighting ends the inevitable demobilization will force those in the military ranks to join the ranks of the unemployed.

Social problems will be more difficult to cope with. There are many divided families and a vast number of war widows with children to raise. The urban areas are hopelessly overcrowded and lack basic services. The system of education has suffered badly during the years of war, and crime is rampant in the cities. In the refugee camps many have developed "mendicant mentalities," and it will not be easy for them to return to their villages and earn their own livelihoods. Also refugee life has had a deadly effect on traditional values; for example thievery, which normally is rare in Montagnard villages, has become a problem in some of their refugee camps.

But worst of all is the terrible bitterness, frustration and disillusionment that 30 years of war have sown among the Vietnamese. Violence and destruction are things they learned to live with. Peace is something they long for and hope for. But when it comes it will be a new condition to which a whole generation will have to adjust. And for many, particularly those who have spent years in the military and paramilitary forces, this adjustment is bound to be painful.

Gerald Hickey, who lived in Vietnam for 12 years, teaches in the Southeast Asia program at Cornell.

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Stanley Kauffmann on films

The Maids

(American Film Theater)

The second item of the American Film Theater's season was that Jacques Brel song-show with the long title. I had writhed in my seat during the stage version and figured that once was enough. The third item was *In Celebration* by David Storey, directed by Lindsay Anderson. This is one of Storey's weaker plays, a watery attempt to do a *Long Day's Journey into Night* in an English mining town. But Alan Bates, as the London-artist son, flashed more of the heartbroken cynicism he had shown in *Butley*, and Anderson showed again that, when he works with a given script instead of being a script collaborator, he is a quite fine director.

The latest AFT film is their most venturous so far, Jean Genet's *The Maids*. In view of the huge technical, stylistic and even metaphysical difficulties, I think it succeeds very well. To my knowledge Genet has been on film only twice before: his own short film about men in prison, *Chant d'Amour*, which is powerful, and Joseph Strick's version of *The Balcony*, which is not. A tangentially relevant film, *Les Abysses*, deals with the actual murders on which Genet based *The Maids;* it's a picture with script trouble but was excellently directed by Nico Papatakis (*TNR*, Dec. 12, 1964). Not much of a cinema record for one of the few great contemporary dramatists, but this new AFT film helps to redress matters.

The Maids was directed by Christopher Miles, whose only previous feature was the forgettable *The Virgin and the Gypsy*. The Genet translation was by Minos Volanakis, who has directed theater productions in London and New York and who has done theater productions of his translation. Judging by Miles' past work as compared with the high quality of the acting here, I dare to guess that Volanakis had something to do with these performances by Glenda Jackson as Solange, Susannah York as Claire and Vivien Merchant as Madame. This play can live only through a large-scale, vocally balletic style which must be struck at once and maintained throughout, *within* which all gradations of emotion and all shades of credibility must be established. This style is the film's first and best achievement, and if Miles realized this essentially theatrical end by himself, I would be—very happily—surprised. His camera work doesn't show equivalent control and taste. He "accompanies" characters a good deal as they move about, which provides some pleasant sinuous feeling, but he pushes the method to self-parody when he even has the camera bob with a character who picks up something from the floor.

Who would have expected acting like this from Susannah York? Not I. Her career had declined from early English-girl charm to recent English-girl affectation. But from the first word here—and she has the first word—York establishes an arch of manner and voice that is simultaneously convincing and assumed. Jackson, of course, is excellent. I had been looking forward to the film chiefly because of her, and she reaffirms that she is one of the best and most versatile actresses alive. The two sisters, with York properly imperious and frightened, with Jackson self-debasing yet in command, create their abyss of exultant horror and vindictive evil with a kind of relentless music. Merchant, as their employer, is perfectly in style, but Madame is supposed to be younger than her maids, with an unattainable beauty that the two sisters long for and loathe. The screenplay by Miles and Robert Enders makes some small cuts in the text and adds some peripheral silent scenes concerning Madame's lover. These nervous little nods to filmic adaptation can be disregarded.

Writing about his play in 1954, seven years after its premiere, Genet called it "a failure." He said that he "wanted to bring theater into the theater . . . to do away with characters . . . to invent a tone of voice, a gait, a gesticulation." He apparently thought he had failed to do this and had abandoned himself "uncourageously to an undertaking without risks or perils." Some lack of risks or perils! If Genet's ex post facto comments are false modesty, then there ought to be a Nobel prize for false modesty and he ought to get it. On the other hand I agree that, by the most rigorous standards, *The Maids* is unsuccessful finally, not for the author's reasons but because in the last third, after the scene with Madame, the voice and gait and gesticulation (which he certainly has invented) become dissociated from the forces that impel them. The forces of the rhetoric, as well as of the themes beneath it, become static; except for the very end, that last third feels stagnant and repetitious. But if *The Maids* is a failure, at what a breathtaking level of moral and esthetic venture.

The casting that Genet wanted—the three women who are the whole cast to be played by men—was not used in the first production by Louis Jouvet and has rarely been used since. (There's a ballet on the play by Herbert Ross that is danced by men, but I've never seen it or a male performance of the play.) The point is related to the playing of whites by blacks in *The Blacks*. (Sartre says that "Genet wishes from the very start to *strike at the root of the apparent* . . . It is not Solange who is to be a theatrical illusion, but rather *the woman Solange.*") The play, and most of the film, takes place in Madame's lush boudoir. It starts (although we learn this only as it proceeds) with the maid Solange playing the other maid, her sister Claire, while Claire herself plays Madame in Madame's clothes. The two carry on an eloquent, vicious, latently and blatantly sexual game of debaser and debased, and if the parts were cast with men, the game could only be more frightening and more complexly "visible."

The game rises to a paroxysm of violence. An alarm clock goes off, warning the maids that playtime is over, Madame will return soon. As they tidy up and change, the telephone rings;

(continued on page 33)

Films Worth Seeing

Amarcord. Fellini's youth, distilled into a bitter, funny, exquisite poem.

A Brief Vacation. Florinda Bolkan strong as a young working woman in De Sica's somewhat mushy account of her awakening.

Donkey Skin. A fairy tale for grown-ups, somewhat pointless but very lovely to watch, including Catherine Deneuve.

Hearts and Minds. Not the definitive Vietnam documentary it ought to have been, especially politically, but with some power.

The Passenger. Far below the best Antonioni, still a suspenseful morality of some effect and much visual beauty.

SK

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Current, Notable Fiction

Lookout Cartridge by Joseph McElroy

(Knopf; $10)

Barthelme and Barth sometimes; Handke, Hawkes and Baraka frequently; Mailer lately; Heller and Pynchon always; and now, with his fourth book, Joseph McElroy: these are our writers of stoned fictions. They've altered our rhythms, stuttered our speech, toyed with our timing and besieged us with noise. They've poised their fictions between order and disorder, meaning and nonmeaning, something and nothing, the mainstream and being at sea, the main man and the outlaw. Posing choices, they've pushed us to edges. And from the edge, they've veered not back into certainty, resolution or coherence, but out into seeming chaos, instability and easy-to-mock vulnerabilities. Their fictions are spacy yet jammed with information. But their greatest information lurks in their rhythms, noise-to-signal rations, and links of bits to other bits. Their greatest information lurks between their items of news.

A book begins to be stoned when it grows sinister with its silences, breaks and disruptions. But a writer shoots juice to his stoned book when he forces us to pay exclusive attention to the spaces between and beyond his bits—forces us by refusing to make hard points, by insisting there is no point, by stuffing the book with more info than we can ever follow, or place in priority, or puzzle out even in retrospect. Unlike McElroy's earlier fictions, *Lookout Cartridge* makes it impossible for readers to fall back on "connectedness," "coherence" or any other rainy day staple of complacent experience. Nothing in this book *makes sense*. Rather, *Lookout Cartridge* and other stoned books show a sort of "nothing" where people *sense without making*. For his 531 dense pages, McElroy builds no visible structure, edifies not at all, resolves only in flashes. As its main character says, the book is finally "like some instance of Hindu Maya that lets us believe in the rest that may not really be there."

The book takes place in the mind of an American named Cartwright, now living in London with his wife and two teenaged children. He's a husband, father, homebody, free-floating entrepreneur, novitiate to the rites of technology and Mayan culture and cartography and filmmaking, all more or less. A dabbler in his times, he's hardly the earnest yeoman his name suggests, and the placing of a Cartwright into circuitries of servo-mechanisms, liquid crystals and Druid brain-breathing is one of the few jokes in this solemn volume. Solemn because Cartwright's life (and his daughter's life, and more than a few of his friends' lives) are in danger. In danger because Cartwright and his friend Dagger DiGorro have made a film in England and Corsica of quasi-random scenes—a Marvelous Country House, a Suitcase Slowly Packed, a Softball Game in Hyde Park and more.

On the film, or on the soundtrack, or in a parallel diary Cartwright kept and his daughter typed, or in his head, something of secret value must have been recorded, perhaps inadvertently, perhaps not. But why should the film endanger everyone? *Did* someone destroy the film? What secrets were recorded? What are all his surrounding plotters doing in London, the Hebrides, New York City, Corsica, Wales, at Stonehenge? And why are our relationships with wives, friends and daughters so ambiguously cluttered? Cartwright thinks of his consciousness as a cartridge whose meaning will be revealed by its surrounding past and projected future, by the making and viewing of the film, but both the past and its future are so specifically uncertain that even his own content is in doubt. And if he is a cartridge to be inserted in some prefigured scheme, who's the inserter? These are some of the questions McElroy poses but to which he refuses clear answers. Is anything left?

The book's first scene and one of its last have Cartwright hovering in a helicopter over Wall Street, watching for an explosion below. It turns out his copter is sabotaged; the passengers seem to "swerve with no forward motion"; and Cartwright wonders if the vehicle can "come down like a landing." Indeed the question is if he and we can survive all this hovering and swerving. If not, then the book will gutter out into its own entropy. And Cartwright paraphrases the second law of thermodynamics at one point: "System probably moves toward increasingly *im*probable states: Cartwright's Law?" If the book does collapse simply into improbability, then it is merely another novel despairing over the falling-apart world. But the helicopter does land safely, Cartwright's Law is a brief egocentricity, and the novel pushes beyond entropic clichés: "I feel but cannot understand a law that lies beyond increasing improbability and the more I feel it the less I can claim it as let us say Cartwright's Law . . . I am ready to be at home with the unexpected which is a concussion that inserts itself like the *Om* of an overhot stereo in a space in my body not previously there."

From homebody to being at "home with the unexpected" is the distance Cartwright travels in his tale. And that is also, if crudely, the tale of the shift from straight to stoned fiction. *Lookout Cartridge* does create spaces "not previously there." It's a book that repays rereading and yes, it only grows stronger in hindsight. Still, one wishes in frustration for more of what Cartwright calls "concussion." And that's one of McElroy's nicest touches, for while he seems to defuse his perils he actually compounds them. The deaths in his story are as accidental as its full plenty of details and its ultimate destruction of concrete meaning. When Cartwright finally finds the film—which might tell him so much—he burns it. The concussions in *Lookout Cartridge* are muffled, the tracks erased, and hieroglyphic shimmerings are all that remain. It's not a cheap thrill, not a gas, not a hit, toke or rush. After all, it's a stone.

W.T. Lhamon, Jr.

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Shardik
by Richard Adams

(Simon & Schuster; $9.95)

Its majestic language, heroic theme and sustained power will make *Shardik* an instant classic; it will still be in print for a long time. Its achievement is awesome: some of its effects move us so deeply that we're surprised to find them made up of words on a printed page.

Taking place outside of recorded time, the story begins when Shardik, a gigantic bear, saves the hunter Kelderek from an attacking leopard. Believing that Shardik had a special reason to help him, Kelderek goes to the high priestess of his tribe's religion; to visit the forbidden island retreat of the priestess proves that Kelderek has been singled out to serve the will of Shardik, the reincarnated power of God.

Generations ago Shardik was murdered; his worshippers are now afflicted with poverty and ignorance. Can this squalor be reversed? *Shardik* recounts the departed God's return, the strange ways the God's teachings enter the historical process, and the high cost of maintaining faith in the God. Guilt, cruelty and fear all crash down on Kelderek, Shardik's mediator and emissary.

As in the fiction of Graham Greene, Adams gives an ordinary man the awesome job of serving a God whose mercy sometimes looks like punishment. Kelderek immerses his will in Shardik's, carrying out the Bear-God's message without knowing its nature. Though he weakens, he also comes to see that his backsliding can't stop Shardik's will from being enacted. Because the continuance of his own reign, as priest-king of Bekla, depends on Shardik, Kelderek spends much of the novel searching for the bear. And because the material and spiritual health of his people are bound up with the bear, the search must go on regardless of hardship.

But the search turns inward, as geographical frontiers invoke spiritual boundaries. Kelderek undergoes justified ordeals; having promoted the hated practice of slave-trading, he becomes a slave in order to know the evils of slavery. His enslavement bears out the truth of the novel's epigraph (from Jung): "Superstition and accident manifest the will of God." All is grist to the divine mill. Shardik's cage gives way during the crucial battle, enabling the bear to break out. His rout of the enemy forces, apparently a stroke of luck, represents the archetypal mythical victory won through divine intervention.

From myth also comes the idea that everything is both necessary and purposive. The book starts with a collapse, the burning of Shardik's forest, and ends with an integration, the formation of a state rooted in the great bear's worship. Fire purifies as it destroys; it also lends unity to the action. The first chapter is called "The Fire." Chapter 29, "The Fire Festival," during which Shardik nearly burns to death, ends the first half of the book. Another blaze two chapters later destroys Shardik's pen, brings about his escape, and ignites the long, arduous search dominating the second half of the book. Fire roars and crackles throughout. Shardik dies with his shaggy pelt ablaze, like the Old Testament pillar of fire in which God revealed Himself, and his funeral culminates in his drifting down a river on a burning raft. Finally both the fulfillment and the prophecy of the book, which ends with the word "fire," center on children, called "the flames of God" in Shardik's litany. "Shardik gave his life for the children," says Kelderek. "The teaching . . . is simply that there isn't to be a deserted or unhappy child in the world. In the end, that's the world's only security: children are the future, you see. If there were no unhappy children, then the future would be secure." Somehow dodging sentimentality, Adams registers this last-chapter revelation from the point of view of a foreigner, not an insider. That the foreigner is a scholar rather than a soldier or a merchant adventurer gives a humane, well judged view of Kelderek's rule.

No estimate of *Shardik* can overlook how well Adams' firmly cadenced sentences knit with his epical theme, how his style brings to life his uncanny knowledge of bears—their anatomy, feeding and sleeping habits, and reactions to stress. Shardik is both the power of God and a dangerous, wounded animal, half-crazed by hunger, fire and hunters' arrows. Adams makes the great shambling bear a figure of terror and savage grandeur even in his physical ruin:

> *The bear's belly and flank were marked with long, singed streaks, black or dirty grey in color, as though scorched with a burning torch or hot iron bar. In several places the pelt, four fingers thick, had been burned away altogether and the bare flesh, withered and contracted into furrows and proud ridges, was split by cracks and open sores. . . . Several of the wounds were putrescent, oozing a glistening, green matter that had discolored the shaggy hair and clotted it into stiff, dry spikes.*

"Tall as a dwelling-hut, his pelt like a waterfall, his muzzle a wedge across the sky," Shardik grips the reader. Adams filters his acute understanding of human motives through his mighty bear; Shardik embodies the hopes and fears of the people touched by his divinity. The double remove created by the primitive setting and the convention of animist myth lays bare the hidden depths of our basic drives.

Peter Wolfe

Peter Wolfe teaches English at the University of Missouri, St. Louis.

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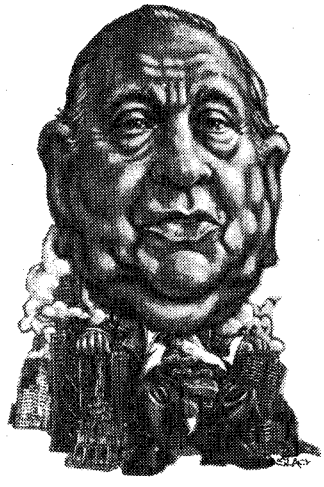

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Early Fascist

Oswald Mosley by Robert Skidelsky

(Holt, Rinehart & Winston; $15)

When Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin allegedly espoused the principle that England was best served by men of second-class brains, because men with first-class brains were likely to have second-class characters, he must have been thinking worriedly about Sir Oswald Mosley, subject of an immensely detailed and largely sympathetic new biography by Robert Skidelsky.

More than a decade before Mosley's biographer was even born, Sir Oswald was such a formidable presence on the English political scene that he appears, thinly disguised, his future frighteningly foreshadowed, in Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point*. In Huxley's novel, Everard Webley is the aristocratic, megalomaniacal leader of the fascist, green-shirted, semimilitaristic British Freemen, a political force whose disciplined, provocative marches through London and mob-appealing public meetings predictably stir outrage and violence. Mosley's black-shirted British Union of Fascists, whose marches and mass meetings evoked stormy confrontations with the left, would not be founded until five years later. Skidelsky, like Mosley in his own 1968 memoir, ignores this example of art anticipating life, but the creation of Webley suggests what was already apparent to perceptive observers of English public affairs: for better or worse Mosley would shake free from the shackles of conventional English party politics.

Why Sir Oswald spurned eventual anointment in the traditional manner to take his chances as splinter party nationalist has been the subject of controversy since it happened. The labels of megalomania and opportunism are easily applied, but are overly simplistic as explanation, while Mosley's politics of confrontation, and appeal to the farthest right, have obscured the credentials he once possessed as an activist intellectual in politics whose earlier economic and political ideas might once have prodded England out of the torpor that now seems irreversible. In 1930 he had warned Parliament, before resigning cabinet office, "What I fear much more than a sudden crisis is a long, slow crumbling through the years until we sink to the level of a Spain, a gradual paralysis, beneath which all the vigour and energy will succumb." Much else that he saw or did in the years before he went out into the political wilderness earn him a hearing even while our sensibilities remain outraged by his warped later career.

Although Skidelsky's book has the thrust of a revisionist history, supported by formidable research in politics, economics and personalities, this reader could not help but keep in mind that on the acknowledgements page of Mosley's autobiography Robert Skidelsky is described as a "younger literary friend." Given that understanding of the relationship on the part of Sir Oswald, one could expect less from this biography than is really the case. Special pleading is primarily reserved for those decisions in Mosley's career that have been the most personally damaging—his embracing of anti-Semitism, his turning to 1930s fascism, his prewar and postwar flirting with fanatics on the political fringe. In almost every case where the image is so tarnished, an appended note by Sir Oswald provides exculpation. The strategy shrewdly preserves the aura of authorial objectivity. Still, since it is impossible to write about the 77-year-old Mosley without a time-distance not available to us, it is reasonable to have as much of the story as can be told—and explained. It is quite a story.

England's poverty of leadership after each of two sanguinary wars, especially the first, is easy to understand. Its junior officer level of command was decimated. Mosley limped back. With his family landholdings sold, he could not be a country squire. He needed a vocation, and saw it in politicizing ex-soldiers into taking the reins from the bungling old men who had blundered Britain into war. He ran for Parliament as a Conservative, then crossed the floor to Labour when he realized how stagnant his first adopted party was likely to remain. Labour under the weak Ramsay MacDonald proved nearly as timid, and when MacDonald himself chose coalition with the Conservatives as a way to ride out the Depression without losing his own job, Mosley was no longer interested in a future as a figurehead cabinet minister. He had done his homework in Keynesian economics, understood the sluggishness of democratic processes, and realized that the rise of the radical right in Europe would not be restricted to Il Duce's Rome.

Mosley's first try at fascism foundered when his New Party went nowhere with an electorate distrustful of untraditional panaceas. Skidelsky considers such Mosley proposals for state control of a private enterprise economy leading to national self-sufficiency as deriving from Keynes, and Mosley even once wrote to Keynes congratulating him on his "fascist" economics; but Keynes drily responded that his theories were intended "not to embrace you but to save the country from you." The alienation from traditional solutions. Skidelsky writes, was rooted in Mosley's "disgust with contemporary social values. At heart he was . . . rebelling against a diseased normality. . . . Despite his conventional successes, the bonds holding Mosley to ordinary politics had always been fragile. They might have

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been strengthened had he been given a real job of work to do. When that failed to materialize, they snapped."

The British Union of Fascists was launched in October 1932. With it Mosley cut himself off from the political establishment and adopted a style and a name he knew would be abhorrent to what Skidelsky grossly understates as "a section of his fellow-countrymen." The rest was predictable. By seeking to consolidate the alienated and the disgruntled in his quest for an England "fit for heroes to live in," he became a willing captive of such extremists. The uniform, the rabble-rousing, the racism were nevertheless not uncongenial to Mosley. He wore the BUF blackshirt, admired Hitler, and answered protests and anti-Semitic articles in his party organ, *Action*, that it was a "hard necessity," and that "dynamic ages—like all great things in nature—are in many respects brutal."

Skidelsky goes to great lengths to defend Mosley against anti-Semitism, suggesting that his black shirts were provoked to violence at marches and meetings by Communists who "deliberately used Jews as front-line troops in order to expose fascism's anti-Semitic potential." Further, he concludes, "A Jewish malaise of this time was to be obsessed by fascism." The choice of words is decidedly peculiar. Nevertheless Skidelsky returns to reason by conceding that as the Mosley movement receded more and more to fringe status, despite the ability to draw crowds, the large national issues he claimed to represent were obscured by "the persecution complex of any frustrated small group with a high sense of its own importance." When war began in 1939 Mosley was preaching accommodation with Hitler to forestall it. His concern "that the Jewish Question would undo the Munich achievement," Skidelsky writes, "is understandable." "Jewish Question"? "Achievement"? One's breath is often taken away by the biographer's easy lapse into the Mosleyite dialectic.

A wartime regulation making it possible to jail "security risks" put Mosley and his second wife Diana, sister of Hitler's English friend Unity Mitford, who committed suicide when the war began, into prison without trial. (Mosley's first wife, Cynthia, a daughter of Lord Curzon, had died in 1933.) When he was released on grounds of ill health in 1943 he was forced by terms of his parole to remain politically inactive, but in 1946 Mosley returned to the fray, still unreconstructed. His magic still worked only with the radical right. There was no resurrection at the ballot box, despite his drawing large crowds of the curious and the loyal at occasional open-air rallies in Trafalgar Square. His new nostrum was "Europeanism," advertised as a self-sufficient union of white, non-Communist Europe, but promoted primarily by hostility to nonwhite immigration. Even his ideologically loyal son Nicholas was finally disillusioned. "I see clearly," he wrote in retrospect, "that while the right hand dealt with grandiose ideas and glory, the left hand let the rat out of the sewer."

Glory eludes Mosley still, but rehabilitation of a sort seems at hand, for while his own autobiography had to be published in the US four years late, and then only by a small house known for its right-leaning list, the present work has the imprint of a major publisher. Does Skidelsky's book belong there? Although heavy on economics and politics, it is skimpy on personal history and often more brief than biography; yet it is the first long look at a lost leader who might have changed the course of history. Had Mosley not lost his frame of reference, Winston Churchill might have been remembered mainly for the debacle at Gallipoli.

Stanley Weintraub

Stanley Weintraub is the author, most recently, of *Whistler* (Weybright).

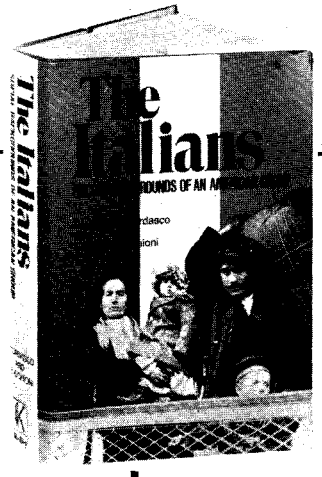
Fine Print

National Book Awards: 26th Round

Doris Grumbach

In New York this past week I had the ho-hum feeling of well-here - we - are - again, despite the hints we have heard that the awards were on their way out and that the ceremonies surrounding them were to be cut down. Everyone waited for an announcement about the future of the awards from Roger L. Stevens, chairman of the Committee on Awards Policy, but nothing came at the press conference to announce the awards except a promise of pronouncement. On the night of the awards Stevens said he had nothing to report, really, that he was trying several avenues in an attempt to save the annual awards: foundation money, corporation support, but the results of those efforts were not yet known. So everyone settled down to an uneventful ceremony at Avery Fisher Hall (last year the highlight, or the low point, whichever you prefer, of the evening was the arrival of a streaker) and the more sustaining gathering and feed for the whole (it seemed) publishing world at the Americana Hotel. No evidence here of belt-tightening; quite the contrary.

The awards themselves? In some cases gratifying, in others (taste and literary judgment being the variables they are), disappointing. I was most disappointed in the fiction awards—a dual award despite a personal request by Stevens to the judges that only one award be made in each category. It went to *Dog Soldiers* by Robert Stone (Hough-



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ton Mifflin; *TNR*, Jan. 4 & 11, '75) and to *The Hair of Harold Roux* by Thomas Williams (Random House). Both are readable books, Stone perhaps the more interesting, to my view, but neither (again a personal judgment) measured up to *Something Happened* by Joseph Heller (Knopf), which was nominated for the fiction award and which I fully expect will be remembered long after the winners have entered the limbo of "good - lord - how - did - *that* - win - an - award!" category.

Three novels I admired did not appear on the list of nominees; had I had a say I would have nominated Diane Johnson's *The Shadow Knows* (Knopf), *Winter in the Blood* by James Welch (Harper & Row) and, my private, perhaps eccentric choice for the award itself (after Heller), *Mundome* by A.G. Mojtabai (Simon and Schuster).

The other awards were predictable. They went to books of genuine quality. I think especially of the history prize won by Harvard professor Bernard Bailyn for his *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Belknap/Harvard University Press; May 4, '74, *TNR*). Bailyn is one of the best scholars of American Revolutionary history writing today. His 1967 *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Harvard) and *Origin of American Politics* (Random House, 1970 paper; Knopf, 1968 hardcover) are still, happily, in print.

To make the Harvard sweep more impressive, Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Basic Books; *TNR*, Apr. 26, '75) took the philosophy prize, a book of which Peter Witonski wrote in last week's *TNR*: it is "a perfect example of how philosophy should be written." And to complete a noticeable university press sweep, the translation prize went to Princeton University Press' edition of Unamuno's *The Agony of Christianity and Essays on Faith*, translated by Anthony Kerrigan.

Studs Terkel acclaimed Theodore Rosengarten's *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (Knopf) in these pages (Oct. 12, '74) when it first appeared; it won the Contemporary Affairs prize. *The Life of Emily Dickinson* by Yale's Richard B. Sewall (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) won the biography award. Of that two-volume, 20-year labor, R.W.B. Lewis wrote in *TNR*, February 8, 1975: "a mountainous biography that re-creates Emily Dickinson and her world amid an extraordinary wealth of detail, every scrap of information available about the poet and the woman, her forbears, family and untold numbers of friends."

At the awards ceremonies, one of the recipients of the Arts and Letters awards, Dr. Lewis Thomas (another was Roger Shattuck for his luminous work on *Marcel Proust*, Viking), remarked that to receive the award for his collection of essays (*The Lives of a Cell*, Viking) was "a very good sign for biology." He said he was especially concerned with "the growing body of totally new information about the way the body works." Biologists are themselves mystified by the "general good sense" as well as the complexity of arrangements in nature . . . One of the great projects for the science [biology] lying just ahead will be the study of connectedness in nature, the ways in which all the creatures we know seem to be strung together, symbiotically, interdependently, all around the earth." This organization of nature, said Thomas, "is basically good-humored. . . but I could be wrong about this."

The prize for poetry went to Marilyn Hacker for *Presentation Piece* (Viking). She spoke for "the diffident minority group" of poets, and particularly feminist and black poets. Silvano Arieti won the Sciences award for *Interpretation of Schizophrenia* (Basic Books), an award he chose to regard as "a tribute to psychiatry . . . [to] the importance of schizophrenia as a mental illness and as a significant social fact."

So much for the major business of the awards. Some minor events went on. The newly formed National Book Critics Circle met for its first membership meeting and its self-appointed president Ivan Sandroff discovered that the Indians were not so easily corraled by the chief. The mass meeting, consisting of a minority of member "crickets" (Huck's word for them in John Seelye's fine satire), a goodly number of publicity people from all the publishers (associate members), was told that an awards committee had been appointed by the advisory board, which had been, I gather, appointed by the president, to give awards next year for the best fiction, nonfiction, poetry and criticism published in the year. The president said the awards would be decided by the advisory board and the committee, at a time early in next year that would beat both the prestigious NBA and Pulitzer prizes to the punch. Would there be a children's book award? someone asked from the floor. No, not this year. Had this matter of awards (some there thought the literary community had already taken the gilt off the gingerbread by so many awards) been voted on by the membership? No, not really. The meeting broke up amid grumbling about Nixonian democracy, stirred on by the circulation at the meeting of *The National Book Critics (sic) Circle Journal* (also *sic*), a six-page broadsheet in which the president advised in the first lines: "Keep this—it's the first of a first! Your grandchildren may be proud of you and culture indebted for your part in creating the organization."

Critics? Journal? Culture? Immortality? The mind boggles at the hyperbole and slinks willingly back into the mundane and less elevated ("enobled" was Sandroff's word for what we crickets do to "art" if we don't "abase" it) and private practices of reviewers, writing in the back pages of newspapers and magazines for the occasional edification of readers, with an eye on the next deadline and very little concern about what our grandchildren will think or say about us. Chances are too good they will hardly have heard of us, and if they have, it will be with a good measure of embarrassment.

Other somewhat edifying notes: Most of the crickets were invited to a dinner party the first evening, at the posh Belvedere Room atop the RCA building, to meet the Doubleday people, especially

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heir nominees for awards. After the buffet supper the president of the company, Samuel S. Vaughan, introduced all the executives of the company who were present—vice presidents, advertising managers, road managers, etc. Then he said he hoped we all enjoyed the evening and sat down. Not introduced, perhaps because it is inevitable that the little author's message gets lost in the grandeur of the medium, were Doubleday's two poetry nominees—Albert Goldbarth and Josephine Jacobsen—who were allowed to maintain the customary authorial anonymity, and the young editor, Diane Matthews, who was responsible for both poets' books.

I had some rewarding moments. I went to the Lotus Club for a P.E.N. cocktail party and talked with Marchette Chute, beloved and witty author of *Shakespeare of London* and *Geoffrey Chaucer of England*, both of which are still in print and which my children grew up loving. "What are you working on now?"

"Sir Philip Sidney."

"Are you coming to the Folger to do research?"

"No," she said tartly. "I don't burden myself with all that. I'm really quite an ignorant writer." Ho, ho ho.

I talked also with Sol Yurick who analyzed and explained and described his new novel, *An Island Death*, for me, to my great chagrin, since I had just finished reviewing it and found almost nothing of what he talked about in the book.

Are the National Book Awards worth the cost, the time, the effort? Of course, with some procedural changes, I would think. For one, the number of awards might well be reduced to three, to increase the importance of the winners and to cut down on judges and award money (if that is a genuine consideration). Second, the social events surrounding them might be contracted—no big bashes, dinners, maintenance of press rooms and use of ballrooms in hotels, affairs for the judges, etc. Let us simply award the money, at a modest presention ceremony—and let the ensuing sales and establishment of reputation be the real reward. On second thought we might *eliminate* the presentations, which have become formal and often dull, and publish the winners' names, neatly boxed, in all the media, and announce them over TV and radio as news. In other words, dig out the author from under the elaborate superstructure of administrative and self-congratulatory goings-on, salute him, give him adequate money as reward for his pains, and send him on his way into the next book. And let the crickets remain on their hearths, quietly critical of those who win, and regretful for those who don't.

Kauffmann, *from page 27*

Madame's Monsieur, who has been arrested on information supplied by the sisters, has been released. To protect themselves, they decide to poison Madame, and they lace her tea with drugs. But when Madame returns she capriciously doesn't drink it; then, when they tell her belatedly that Monsieur is waiting, she leaves to meet him. In an ecstasy of fear and happiness and hate that no synopsis can convey, Claire-Madame drinks the poisoned tea and Solange-Claire delivers a final speech declaring them "beautiful, joyous, drunk, and free!"

If there is one thing that this thousand-mirrored play is not, that thing is social protest. The groveling of the maids, in charade and in "reality," is not 20th-century Figaro. The state of being a servant, the aspect of servility, is only one more facet of existence that interests Genet, one way of laughing bitterly at the inanity of the world. And even that is too bald a reduction. Genet is a homosexual genius, not a genius who happens to be homosexual but a genius of homosexuality, who has also been a prostitute and a professional criminal (10 convictions for theft). The history of literature shows us no writer of comparable ability who was so thoroughly an outsider. In the personal aspect Sade and Huysmans seem, by comparison, square. Genet's work has been created from a position in which every percept of beauty, every article of faith had to be made either in opposition to its counterparts inside or absolutely irrelevantly to them. Genet, it seems to me, is laughing at a world in which servant-and-mistress relations are either liked by the mistress or hated by the maid, considering that the whole relation is suspended over what he sees as great emptiness. All that exists for him is the will to pretend and the conviction that, in his will to fabricate, there is some hope for communion—not for salvation or redemption but for someone's hand to clasp as he plunges with him/her into the chasm. The delight in sex of any kind, in crime, the fantasies of murder, all figure as contempt for those who do not recognize the chasm.

His theater genius—I don't speak here of his novels—lies in the magnificent visual images and tensile relations he has chosen, in the gorgeous language (well translated) that grows out of them. The trouble with *The Maids*, unlike *The Balcony* and *The Blacks* and others, is that toward the end the language leaves the play behind, despite the beautiful performances here. It sags a bit; and the sag isn't helped by the AFT's formulaic insistence on an intermission in a 95-minute film.

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